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JEZEBEL'S DAUGHTER

BY

WILKIE COLLINS



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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PART I.—*continued.*

CHAPTER XVII.

THE widow was alone in the room; standing by the bedside table on which Mr. Keller's night-drink was placed. I was so completely taken by surprise, that I stood stock-still like a fool, and stared at Madame Fontaine in silence.

On her side she was, as I believe, equally astonished and equally confounded, but better able to conceal it. For the moment, and only for the moment, she too had nothing to say. Then she lifted her left hand from under her shawl. 'You have

caught me, Mr. David !' she said—and held up a drawing-book as she spoke.

'What are you doing here?' I asked.

She pointed with the book to the famous carved mantelpiece.

'You know how I longed to make a study of that glorious work,' she answered. 'Don't be hard on a poor artist who takes her opportunity when she finds it.'

'May I ask how you came to know of the opportunity, Madame Fontaine?'

'Entirely through your kind sympathy, my friend,' was the cool reply.

'My sympathy? What do you mean?'

'Was it not you, David, who considerately thought of Minna when the post came in? And did you not send the man-servant to us, with her letter from Fritz?'

The blubbering voice of Joseph, trembling for his situation, on the landing outside, interrupted me before I could speak again.

‘I’m sure I meant no harm, sir. I only said I was in a hurry to get back, because you had all gone to the theatre, and I was left (with nobody but the kitchen girl) to take care of the house. When the lady came, and showed me her drawing-book——’

‘That will do, friend Joseph,’ said the widow, signing to him to go downstairs in her easy self-possessed way. ‘Mr. David is too sensible to take notice of trifles. There! there! go down.’ She turned to me, with an expression of playful surprise. ‘How very serious you look!’ she said gaily.

‘It might have been serious for *you*, Madame Fontaine, if Mr. Keller had returned to the house to fetch his opera-glass himself.’

‘Ah! he has left his opera-glass behind him? Let me help you to look for it. I have done my sketch; I am quite at your service.’ She forestalled me in finding the opera-glass. ‘I really had no other chance of making a study of the chimney-piece,’ she went on, as she handed the glass to me. ‘Impossible to ask Mr. Engelman to let me in again, after what happened on the last occasion. And, if I must confess it, there is another motive besides my admiration for the chimney-piece. You know how poor we are. The man who keeps the picture-shop in the Zeil is willing to employ me.

He can always sell these memorials of old Frankfort to English travellers. Even the few florins he gives me will find two half-starved women in housekeeping money for a week.'

It was all very plausible ; and perhaps (in my innocent days before I met with Frau Meyer) I might have thought it quite likely to be true. In my present frame of mind, I only asked the widow if I might see her sketch.

She shook her head, and sheltered the drawing-book again under her shawl.

'It is little better than a memorandum at present,' she explained. 'Wait till I have touched it up, and made it saleable—and I will show it to you with pleasure. You will not make mischief, Mr. David, by mentioning

my act of artistic invasion to either of the old gentlemen? It shall not be repeated—I give you my word of honour. There is poor Joseph, too. You don't want to ruin a well-meaning lad, by getting him turned out of his place? Of course not! We part as friends who understand each other, don't we? Minna would have sent her love and thanks, if she had known I was to meet you. Good-night.'

She ran downstairs, humming a little tune to herself, as blithe as a young girl. I heard a momentary whispering with Joseph in the hall. Then the house-door closed—and there was an end of Madame Fontaine for that time.

After no very long reflection, I decided that my best course would be to severely

caution Joseph, and to say nothing to the partners of what had happened—for the present, at least. I should certainly do mischief, by setting the two old friends at variance again on the subject of the widow, if I spoke ; to say nothing (as another result) of the likelihood of Joseph's dismissal by Mr. Keller. Actuated by these reasonable considerations, I am bound frankly to add that I must have felt some vague misgivings as well. Otherwise, why did I carefully examine Mr. Keller's room (before I returned to the theatre), without any distinct idea of any conceivable discovery that I might make? Not the vestige of a suspicious appearance rewarded my search. The room was in its customary state of order, from the razors and brushes on the toilet-table to the

regular night-drink of barley-water, ready as usual in the jug by the bedside.

I left the bedchamber at last. Why was I still not at my ease? Why was I rude enough, when I thought of the widow, to say to myself, ‘Damn her!’ Why did I find Gluck’s magnificent music grow wearisome from want of melody as it went on? Let the learned in such things realise my position, and honour me by answering those questions for themselves.

We were quite gay at supper ; the visit to the theatre had roused the spirits of the two partners, by means of a wholesome break in the monotony of their lives. I had seldom seen Mr. Keller so easy and so cheerful. Always an abstemious man, he exercised his usual moderation in eating and

drinking ; and he was the first to go to bed. But, while he was with us, he was, in the best sense of the word, a delightful companion ; and he looked forward to the next opera night with the glee of a schoolboy looking forward to a holiday.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE breakfast-room proved to be empty when I entered it the next morning. It was the first time in my experience that I had failed to find Mr. Keller established at the table. He had hitherto set the example of early rising to his partner and to myself. I had barely noticed his absence, when Mr. Engelman followed me into the room with a grave and anxious face, which proclaimed that something was amiss.

‘Where is Mr. Keller?’ I asked.

‘In bed, David.’

‘Not ill, I hope?’

‘I don’t know what is the matter with him, my dear boy. He says he has passed a bad night, and he can’t leave his bed and attend to business as usual. Is it the close air of the theatre, do you think?’

‘Suppose I make him a comfortable English cup of tea?’ I suggested.

‘Yes, yes! And take it up yourself. I should like to know what you think of him.’

Mr. Keller alarmed me in the first moment when I looked at him. A dreadful apathy had possessed itself of this naturally restless and energetic man. He lay quite motionless, except an intermittent trembling of his hands as they rested on the counterpane. His eyes opened for a moment when I spoke to him—then closed again as if the effort of looking at anything wearied him. He feebly

shook his head when I offered him the cup of tea, and said in a fretful whisper, 'Let me be!' I looked at his night-drink. The jug and glass were both completely empty. 'Were you thirsty in the night?' In the same fretful whisper he answered, 'Horribly!' 'Are you not thirsty now?' He only repeated the words he had first spoken — 'Let me be!' There he lay, wanting nothing, caring for nothing; his face looking pinched and wan already, and the intermittent trembling still at regular intervals shaking his helpless hands.

We sent at once for the physician who had attended him in trifling illnesses at former dates.

The doctor who is not honest enough to confess it when he is puzzled, is a well-known

member of the medical profession in all countries. Our present physician was one of that sort. He pronounced the patient to be suffering from low (or nervous) fever—but it struck Mr. Engelman, as it struck me, that he found himself obliged to say something, and said it without feeling sure of the correctness of his own statement. He prescribed, and promised to pay us a second visit later in the day. Mother Barbara, the housekeeper, was already installed as nurse. Always a domestic despot, she made her tyranny felt even in the sick-room. She declared that she would leave the house if any other woman presumed to enter it as nurse. ‘When my master is ill,’ said Mother Barbara, ‘my master is my property.’ It was plainly impossible that a woman, at

her advanced age, could keep watch at the bedside by day and night together. In the interests of peace we decided on waiting until the next day. If Mr. Keller showed no signs of improvement by that time, I undertook to inquire at the hospital for a properly qualified nurse.

Later in the day, our doubts of the doctor were confirmed. He betrayed his own perplexity in arriving at a true ‘diagnosis’ of the patient’s case, by bringing with him, at his second visit, a brother-physician, whom he introduced as Doctor Dormann, and with whom he asked leave to consult at the bedside.

The new doctor was the younger, and evidently the firmer person of the two.

His examination of the sick man was

patient and careful in the extreme. He questioned us minutely about the period at which the illness had begun ; the state of Mr Keller's health immediately before it ; the first symptoms noticed ; what he had eaten, and what he had drunk ; and so on. Next, he desired to see all the inmates of the house who had access to the bed-chamber ; looking with steady scrutiny at the house-keeper, the footman, and the maid, as they followed each other into the room—and dismissing them again without remark. Lastly, he astounded his old colleague by proposing to administer an emetic. There was no prevailing on him to give his reasons. ' If I prove to be right, you shall hear my reasons. If I prove to be wrong, I have only to say so, and no reasons will be required.

Clear the room, administer the emetic, and keep the door locked till I come back.'

With those parting directions he hurried out of the house.

'What *can* he mean?' said Mr. Engelman, leading the way out of the bedchamber.

The elder doctor left in charge heard the words, and answered them, addressing himself, not to Mr. Engelman, but to me. He caught me by the arm, as I was leaving the room in my turn.

'Poison!' the doctor whispered in my ear. 'Keep it a secret; that's what he means.'

I ran to my own bedchamber and bolted myself in. At that one word, 'Poison,' the atrocious suggestion of Frau Meyer, when she had referred to Doctor Fontaine's lost medicine-chest, instantly associated itself in

my memory with Madame Fontaine's suspicious intrusion into Mr. Keller's room. Good God! had I not surprised her standing close by the table on which the night-drink was set? and had I not heard Doctor Dormann say, 'That's unlucky,' when he was told that the barley-water had been all drunk by the patient, and the jug and glass washed as usual? For the first few moments, I really think I must have been beside myself, so completely was I overpowered by the horror of my own suspicions. I had just sense enough to keep out of Mr. Engelman's way until I felt my mind restored in some degree to its customary balance.

Recovering the power of thinking connectedly, I began to feel ashamed of the panic which had seized on me.

What conceivable object had the widow to gain by Mr. Keller's death? Her whole interest in her daughter's future centred, on the contrary, in his living long enough to be made ashamed of his prejudices, and to give his consent to the marriage. To kill him for the purpose of removing Fritz from the influence of his father's authority would be so atrocious an act in itself, and would so certainly separate Minna and Fritz for ever, in the perfectly possible event of a discovery, that I really recoiled from the contemplation of this contingency as I might have recoiled from deliberately disgracing myself. Doctor Dormann had rashly rushed at a false conclusion—that was the one comforting reflection that occurred to me. I threw open my door again in a frenzy of impa-

tience to hear the decision, whichever way it might turn.

The experiment had been tried in my absence. Mr. Keller had fallen into a broken slumber. Doctor Dormann was just closing the little bag in which he had brought his testing apparatus from his own house. Even now there was no prevailing on him to state his suspicions plainly.

‘It’s curious,’ he said, ‘to see how all mortal speculations on events, generally resolve themselves into threes. Have we given the emetic too late? Are my tests insufficient? Or have I made a complete mistake?’ He turned to his elder colleague. ‘My dear doctor, I see you want a positive answer. No need to leave the room, Mr. Engelman! You and the young English

gentleman, your friend, must not be deceived for a single moment so far as I am concerned. I see in the patient a mysterious wasting of the vital powers, which is not accompanied by the symptoms of any disease known to me to which I can point as a cause. In plain words, I tell you, I don't understand Mr. Keller's illness.'

It was perhaps through a motive of delicacy that he persisted in making a needless mystery of his suspicions. In any case he was evidently a man who despised all quackery from the bottom of his heart. The old doctor looked at him with a frown of disapproval, as if his frank confession had violated the unwritten laws of medical etiquette.

'If you will allow me to watch the case,'

he resumed, ‘under the superintendence of my respected colleague, I shall be happy to submit to approval any palliative treatment which may occur to me. My respected colleague knows that I am always ready to learn.’

His respected colleague made a formal bow, looked at his watch, and hastened away to another patient. Doctor Dormann, taking up his hat, stopped to look at Mother Barbara, fast asleep in her easy chair by the bedside.

‘I must find you a competent nurse to-morrow,’ he said. ‘No, not one of the hospital women—we want someone with finer feelings and tenderer hands than theirs. In the meantime, one of you must sit up with Mr. Keller to-night. If I am not

wanted before, I will be with you to-morrow morning.'

I volunteered to keep watch ; promising to call Mr. Engelman if any alarming symptoms showed themselves. The old housekeeper, waking after her first sleep, characteristically insisted on sending me to bed, and taking my place. I was too anxious and uneasy (if I may say it of myself) to be as compliant as usual. Mother Barbara, for once, found that she had a resolute person to deal with. At a less distressing time, there would have been something irresistibly comical in her rage and astonishment, when I settled the dispute by locking her out of the room.

Soon afterwards Joseph came in with a message. If there was no immediate

necessity for his presence in the bedchamber, Mr. Engelman would go out to get a breath of fresh air, before he retired for the night. There was no necessity for his presence ; and I sent a message downstairs to that effect.

An hour later Mr. Engelman came in to see his old friend, and to say good-night. After an interval of restlessness, the sufferer had become composed, and was dozing again under the influence of his medicine. Making all allowances for the sorrow and anxiety which Mr. Engelman must necessarily feel under the circumstances, I thought his manner strangely absent and confused. He looked like a man with some burden on his mind which he was afraid to reveal and unable to throw off.

‘Somebody must be found, David, who does understand the case,’ he said, looking at the helpless figure on the bed.

‘Who can we find?’ I asked.

He bade me good-night without answering. It is no exaggeration to say that I passed my night at the bedside in a miserable state of indecision and suspense. The doctor’s experiment had failed to prove absolutely that the doctor’s doubts were without foundation. In this state of things, was it my bounden duty to tell the medical men what I had seen, when I went back to the house to look for Mr. Keller’s opera-glass? The more I thought of it, the more I recoiled from the idea of throwing a frightful suspicion on Minna’s mother which would overshadow an innocent woman for

the rest of her life. What proof had I that she had lied to me about the sketch and the mantelpiece? And, without proof, how could I, how dare I, open my lips? I succeeded in deciding firmly enough for the alternative of silence, during the intervals when my attendance on the sick man was not required. But, when he wanted his medicine, when his pillows needed a little arrangement, when I saw his poor eyes open, and look at me vacantly—then my resolution failed me; my indecision returned; the horrid necessity of speaking showed itself again, and shook me to the soul. Never in the trials of later life have I passed such a night as that night at Mr. Keller's bedside.

When the light of the new day shone

in at the window, it was but too plainly visible that the symptoms had altered for the worse.

The apathy was more profound, the wan pinched look of the face had increased, the intervals between the attacks of nervous trembling had grown shorter and shorter. Come what might of it, when Dr. Dormann paid his promised visit, I felt I was now bound to inform him that another person besides the servants and ourselves had obtained access secretly to Mr. Keller's room.

I was so completely worn out by agitation and want of sleep—and I showed it, I suppose, so plainly—that good Mr. Engelman insisted on my leaving him in charge, and retiring to rest. I lay down on my bed, with the door of my room ajar, resolved to

listen for the doctor's footsteps on the stairs, and to speak to him privately after he had seen the patient.

If I had been twenty years older, I might have succeeded in carrying out my intention. But, with the young, sleep is a paramount necessity, and nature insists on obedience to its merciful law. I remember feeling drowsy; starting up from the bed, and walking about my room, to keep myself awake; then lying down again from sheer fatigue; and after that—total oblivion! When I woke, and looked at my watch, I found that I had been fast asleep for no less than six hours!

Bewildered and ashamed of myself—afraid to think of what might have happened in that long interval—I hurried to Mr.

Keller's room, and softly knocked at the door.

A woman's voice answered me, 'Come in!'

I paused with my hand on the door—the voice was familiar to me. I had a moment's doubt whether I was mad or dreaming. The voice softly repeated, 'Come in!' I entered the room.

There she was, seated at the bedside, smiling quietly and lifting her finger to her lips! As certainly as I saw the familiar objects in the room, and the prostrate figure on the bed, I saw—Madame Fontaine!

'Speak low,' she said. 'He sleeps very lightly; he must not be disturbed.'

I approached the bed and looked at him.

There was a faint tinge of colour in his face ; there was moisture on his forehead ; his hands lay as still on the counterpane, in the blessed repose that possessed him, as the hands of a sleeping child. I looked round at Madame Fontaine.

She smiled again ; my utter bewilderment seemed to amuse her. ‘He is left entirely to me, David,’ she said, looking tenderly at her patient. ‘Go downstairs and see Mr. Engelman. There must be no talking here.’

She lightly wiped the perspiration from his forehead ; lightly laid her fingers on his pulse—then reclined in the easy chair, with her eyes fixed in silent interest on the sleeping man. She was the very ideal of the nurse with fine feelings and tender hands,

contemplated by Doctor Dormann when I had last seen him. Any stranger looking into the room at that moment would have said, ‘What a charming picture! What a devoted wife!’

CHAPTER XIX.

‘A TUMBLER of the old Marcobrunner, David, and a slice of the game pie—before I say one word about what we owe to that angel upstairs. Off with the wine, my dear boy ; you look as pale as death !’

With those words Mr. Engelman lit his pipe, and waited in silence until the good eating and drinking had done their good work.

‘Now carry your mind back to last night,’ he began. ‘You remember my going out to get a breath of fresh air. Can you guess what that meant ?’

I guessed of course that it meant a visit to Madame Fontaine.

‘Quite right, David. I promised to call on her earlier in the day; but poor Keller’s illness made that impossible. She wrote to me under the impression that something serious must have happened to prevent me, for the first time, from keeping an appointment that I had made with her. When I left you I went to answer her note personally. She was not only distressed to hear of Mr. Keller’s illness, she was interested enough in my sad news to ask particularly in what form the illness declared itself. When I mentioned what the symptoms were, she showed an agitation which took me quite by surprise. “Do the doctors understand what is the matter with him?” she asked. I told

her that one of the doctors was evidently puzzled, and that the other had acknowledged that the malady was so far incomprehensible to him. She clasped her hands in despair—she said, “Oh, if my poor husband had been alive!” I naturally asked what she meant. I wish I could give her explanation, David, in her own delightful words. It came in substance to this. Some person in her husband’s employment at the University of Würzburg had been attacked by a malady presenting exactly the same symptoms from which Mr. Keller was suffering. The medical men had been just as much at a loss what to do as *our* medical men. Alone among them Doctor Fontaine understood the case. He made up the medicine that he administered with his own

hand. Madame Fontaine, under her husband's instructions, assisted in nursing the sick man, and in giving the nourishment prescribed when he was able to eat. His extraordinary recovery is remembered in the University to this day.'

I interrupted Mr. Engelman at that point. 'Of course you asked her for the prescription?' I said. 'I begin to understand it now.'

'No, David; you don't understand it yet. I certainly asked her for the prescription. No such thing was known to be in existence—she reminded me that her husband had made up the medicine himself. But she remembered that the results had exceeded his anticipations, and that only a part of the remedy had been used. The bottle

might still perhaps be found at Würzburg. Or it might be in a small portmanteau belonging to her husband, which she had found in his bedroom, and had brought away with her, to be examined at some future time. “I have not had the heart to open it yet,” she said; “but for Mr. Keller’s sake, I will look it over before you go away.” There is a Christian woman, David, if ever there was one yet! After the manner in which poor Keller had treated her, she was as eager to help him as if he had been her dearest friend. Minna offered to take her place. “Why should you distress yourself, mamma?” she said. “Tell me what the bottle is like, and let me try if I can find it.” No! It was quite enough for Madame Fontaine that there was an act of mercy to be done. At any

sacrifice of her own feelings, she was prepared to do it.'

I interrupted him again, eager to hear the end.

'And she found the bottle?' I said.

'She found the bottle,' Mr. Engelman resumed. 'I can show it to you, if you like. She has herself requested me to keep it under lock and key, so long as it is wanted in this house.'

He opened an old cabinet, and took out a long narrow bottle of dark-blue glass. In form, it was quaintly and remarkably unlike any modern bottle that I had ever seen. The glass stopper was carefully secured by a piece of leather, for the better preservation, I suppose, of the liquid inside. Down one side of the bottle ran a narrow strip of paper,

notched at regular intervals to indicate the dose that was to be given. No label appeared on it; but, examining the surface of the glass carefully, I found certain faintly-marked stains, which suggested that the label might have been removed, and that some traces of the paste or gum by which it had been secured had not been completely washed away. I held the bottle up to the light, and found that it was still nearly half full. Mr. Engelman forbade me to remove the stopper. It was very important, he said, that no air should be admitted to the bottle, except when there was an actual necessity for administering the remedy.

‘I took it away with me the same night,’ he went on. ‘And a wretched state of mind I was in, between my anxiety to give the

medicine to poor dear Keller immediately, and my fear of taking such a serious responsibility entirely on myself. Madame Fontaine, always just in her views, said, "You had better wait and consult the doctors." She made but one condition (the generous creature!) relating to herself. "If the remedy is tried," she said, "I must ask you to give it a fair chance by permitting me to act as nurse; the treatment of the patient when he begins to feel the benefit of the medicine is of serious importance. I know this from my husband's instructions, and it is due to his memory (to say nothing of what is due to Mr. Keller) that I should be at the bedside." It is needless to say that I joyfully accepted the offered help. So the night passed. The next morning, soon after

you fell asleep, the doctors came. You may imagine what they thought of poor Keller, when I tell you that they recommended me to write instantly to Fritz in London summoning him to his father's bedside. I was just in time to catch the special mail which left this morning. Don't blame me, David. I could not feel absolutely sure of the new medicine ; and, with time of such terrible importance, and London so far off, I was really afraid to miss a post.'

I was far from blaming him—and I said so. In his place I should have done what he did. We arranged that I should write to Fritz by that night's mail, on the chance that my announcement of the better news might reach him before he left London.

'My letter despatched,' Mr. Engelman

continued, ‘I begged both the doctors to speak with me before they went away, in my private room. There I told them, in the plainest words I could find, exactly what I have told you. Doctor Dormann behaved like a gentleman. He said, “Let me see the lady, and speak to her myself, before the new remedy is tried.” As for the other, what do you think he did? Walked out of the house (the old brute!) and declined any further attendance on the patient. And who do you think followed him out of the house, David, when I sent for Madame Fontaine? Another old brute—Mother Barbara!’

After what I had seen myself of the house-keeper’s temper on the previous evening, this last piece of news failed to surprise me. To be stripped of her authority as nurse in

favour of a stranger, and that stranger a handsome lady, was an aggravation of the wrong which Mother Barbara had contemplated, when she threatened us with the alternative of leaving the house.

‘Well,’ Mr. Engelman resumed, ‘Doctor Dormann asked his questions, and smelt and tasted the medicine, and with Madame Fontaine’s full approval took away a little of it to be analysed. *That* came to nothing! The medicine kept its own secret. All the ingredients but two set analysis at defiance! In the meantime we gave the first dose. Half an hour since we tried the second. You have seen the result with your own eyes. She has saved his life, David, and we have you to thank for it. But for you we might never have known Madame Fontaine.’

The door opened as he spoke, and I found myself confronted by a second surprise. Minna came in, wearing a cook's apron, and asked if her mother had rung for her yet. Under the widow's instructions, she was preparing the peculiar vegetable diet which had been prescribed by Doctor Fontaine as part of the cure. The good girl was eager to make herself useful to us in any domestic capacity. What a charming substitute for the crabbed old housekeeper who had just left us !

So here were Madame Fontaine and Minna actually established as inmates under the same roof with Mr. Keller ! What would Fritz think, when he knew of it ? What would Mr. Keller say when he recognised

his nurse, and when he heard that she had saved his life? ‘All’s well that ends well’ is a good proverb. But we had not got as far as that yet. The question in our case was, *How* will it end?

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN, late that night, I entered my bedroom again, how I blessed the lucky accident of my six hours' sleep, after a night's watching at Mr. Keller's bedside !

If I had spoken to Doctor Dormann as I had positively resolved to speak, he would, beyond all doubt, have forbidden the employment of Madame Fontaine's remedy ; Mr. Keller would have died ; and the innocent woman who had saved his life would have been suspected, perhaps even tried, on a charge of murdering him. I really trembled when I looked back on the terrible

consequences which must have followed, if I had succeeded that morning in keeping myself awake.

The next day, the doses of the wonderful medicine were renewed at the regular intervals ; and the prescribed vegetable diet was carefully administered. On the day after, the patient was so far advanced on the way to recovery, that the stopper of the dark-blue bottle was permanently secured again under its leather guard. Mr. Engelman told me that nearly two doses of it were still left at the bottom. He also mentioned, on my asking to look at it again, that the widow had relieved him of the care of the bottle, and had carefully locked it up in her own room.

Late on this day also, the patient being

well-enough to leave his bed and to occupy the armchair in his room, the inevitable disclosure took place ; and Madame Fontaine stood revealed in the character of the Good Samaritan who had saved Mr. Keller's life.

By Doctor Dormann's advice, those persons only were permitted to enter the bedroom whose presence was absolutely necessary. Besides Madame Fontaine and the doctor himself, Mr. Engelman and Minna were the other witnesses of the scene. Mr. Engelman had his claim to be present as an old friend ; and Minna was to be made useful, at her mother's suggestion, as a means of gently preparing Mr. Keller's mind for the revelation that was to come. Under these circumstances, I can only describe what took place, by repeating the little

narrative with which Minna favoured me, after she had left the room.

‘We arranged that I should wait downstairs,’ she said, ‘until I heard the bedroom bell ring—and then I myself was to take up Mr. Keller’s dinner of lentils and cream, and put it on his table without saying a word.’

‘Exactly like a servant!’ I exclaimed.

Gentle sweet-tempered Minna answered my foolish interruption with her customary simplicity and good sense.

‘Why not?’ she asked. ‘Fritz’s father may one day be my father; and I am happy to be of the smallest use to him, whenever he wants me. Well, when I went in, I found him in his chair, with the light let into the room, and with plenty of pillows to support him. Mr. Engelman and the doctor

were on either side of him ; and poor dear mamma was standing back in a corner behind the bed, where he could not see her. He looked up at me, when I came in with my tray. “ Who’s this ? ” he asked of Mr. Engelman—“ is she a new servant ? ” Mr. Engelman, humouring him, answered, “ Yes.” “ A nice-looking girl,” he said ; “ but what does Mother Barbara say to her ? ” Upon this, Mr. Engelman told him how the house-keeper had left her place and why. As soon as he had recovered his surprise, he looked at me again. “ But who has been my nurse ? ” he inquired ; “ surely not this young girl ? ” “ No, no ; the young girl’s mother has nursed you,” said Mr. Engelman. He looked at the doctor as he spoke ; and the doctor interfered for the first time. “ She has not only

nursed you, sir," he said; "I can certify medically that she has saved your life. Don't excite yourself. You shall hear exactly how it happened?" In two minutes, he told the whole story, so clearly and beautifully that it was quite a pleasure to hear him. One thing only he concealed—the name. "Who is she?" Mr. Keller cried out. "Why am I not allowed to express my gratitude? Why isn't she here?" "She is afraid to approach you, sir," said the doctor; "you have a very bad opinion of her." "A bad opinion," Mr. Keller repeated, "of a woman I don't know? Who is the slanderer who has said that of me?" The doctor signed to Mr. Engelman to answer. "Speak plainly," he whispered, behind the chair. Mr. Engelman did speak

plainly. "Pardon me, my dear Keller, there is no slanderer in this matter. Your own action has spoken for you. A short time since—try if you cannot remember it yourself—a lady sent a letter to you; and you sent the letter back to her, refusing to read it. Do you know how she has returned the insult? That noble creature is the woman to whom you owe your life." When he had said those words, the doctor crossed the room, and returned again to Mr. Keller, leading my mother by the hand.'

Minna's voice faltered; she stopped at the most interesting part of her narrative.

'What did Mr. Keller say?' I asked.

'There was silence in the room,' Minna answered softly. 'I heard nothing except the ticking of the clock.'

‘ But you must have seen something ? ’

‘ No, David. I couldn’t help it—I was crying. After a while, my mother put her arm round me and led me to Mr. Keller. I dried my eyes as well as I could, and saw him again. His head was bent down on his breast—his hands hung helpless over the arms of the chair—it was dreadful to see him so overwhelmed by shame and sorrow ! “ What can I do ? ” he groaned to himself. “ God help me, what can I do ? ” Mamma spoke to him—so sweetly and so prettily—“ You can give this poor girl of mine a kiss, sir ; the new servant who has waited on you is my daughter Minna.” He looked up quickly, and drew me to him. “ I can make but one atonement, my dear,” he said—and then he kissed me, and whispered, “ Send for

Fritz." Oh, don't ask me to tell you any more, David ; I shall only begin crying again—and I am *so* happy ! '

She left me to write to Fritz by that night's post. I tried vainly to induce her to wait a little. We had no electric telegraphs at our disposal, and we were reduced to guessing at events. But there was certainly a strong probability that Fritz might have left London immediately on the receipt of Mr. Engelman's letter, announcing that his father was dangerously ill. In this case, my letter, despatched by the next mail to relieve his anxiety, would be left unopened in London ; and Fritz might be expected to arrive (if he travelled without stopping) in the course of the next day or two. I put this reasonable view of the matter to Minna, and

received a thoroughly irrational and womanly reply.

‘ I don’t care, David ; I shall write to him, for all that.’

‘ Why ? ’

‘ Because I like writing to him.’

‘ What ! whether he receives your letter or not ? ’

‘ Whether he receives it or not,’ she answered saucily, ‘ I shall have the pleasure of writing to him—that is all I want.’

She covered four pages of note-paper, and insisted on posting them herself.

The next morning Mr. Keller was able, with my help and Mr. Engelman’s, to get downstairs to the sitting-room. We were both with him, when Madame Fontaine came in.

‘Well,’ he asked, ‘have you brought it with you?’

She handed to him a sealed envelope, and then turned to explain herself to me.

‘The letter that you put on Mr. Keller’s desk,’ she said pleasantly. ‘This time, David, I act as my own postman—at Mr. Keller’s request’

In her place, I should certainly have torn it up. To keep it, on the bare chance of its proving to be of some use in the future, seemed to imply either an excessive hopefulness or an extraordinary foresight, on the widow’s part. Without in the least comprehending my own state of mind, I felt that she had, in some mysterious way, disappointed me by keeping that letter. As a matter of course, I turned to leave the room,

and Mr. Engelman (from a similar motive of delicacy) followed me to the door. Mr. Keller called us both back.

‘Wait, if you please,’ he said, ‘until I have read it.’

Madame Fontaine was looking out of the window. It was impossible for us to discover whether she approved of our remaining in the room or not.

Mr. Keller read the closely written pages with the steadiest attention. He signed to the widow to approach him, and took her hand when he had arrived at the last words.

‘Let me ask your pardon,’ he said, in the presence of my partner and in the presence of David Glenney, who took charge of your letter. Madame Fontaine, I speak the

plain truth, in the plainest words, when I tell you that I am ashamed of myself.'

She dropped on her knees before him, and entreated him to say no more. Mr. Engelman looked at her, absorbed in admiration. Perhaps it was the fault of my English education—I thought the widow's humility a little overdone. What Mr. Keller's opinion might be, he kept to himself. He merely insisted on her rising, and taking a chair by his side.

'To say that I believe every word of your letter,' he resumed, 'is only to do you the justice which I have too long delayed. But there is one passage which I must feel satisfied that I thoroughly understand, if you will be pleased to give me the assurance of it with your own lips. Am I right in con-

cluding, from what is here written of your husband's creditors, that his debts (which have now, in honour, become your debts) have been all actually *paid* to the last farthing ?'

'To the last farthing !' Madame Fontaine answered, without a moment's hesitation. 'I can show you the receipts, sir, if you like.'

'No, madam ! I take your word for it—I require nothing more. Your title to my heart-felt respect is now complete. The slanders which I have disgraced myself by believing would never have found their way to my credulity, if they had not first declared you to have ruined your husband by your debts. I own that I have never been able to divest myself of my inbred dislike and

distrust of people who contract debts which they are not able to pay. The light manner in which the world is apt to view the relative positions of debtor and creditor is abhorrent to me. If I promise to pay a man money, and fail to keep my promise, I am no better than a liar and a cheat. That always has been, and always will be, *my* view.' He took her hand again as he made that strong declaration. 'There is another bond of sympathy between us,' he said warmly; 'you think as I do.'

Good Heavens, if Frau Meyer had told me the truth, what would happen when Madame Fontaine discovered that her promissory note was in the hands of a stranger—a man who would inexorably present it for payment on the day when it fell due?

I tried to persuade myself that Frau Meyer had *not* told me the truth. Perhaps I might have succeeded—but for my remembrance of the disreputable-looking stranger on the door-step, who had been so curious to know if Madame Fontaine intended to leave her lodgings.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE next day, my calculation of possibilities in the matter of Fritz turned out to be correct.

Returning to Main Street, after a short absence from the house, the door was precipitately opened to me by Minna. Before she could say a word, her face told me the joyful news. Before I could congratulate her, Fritz himself burst headlong into the hall, and made one of his desperate attempts at embracing me. This time I succeeded (being the shorter man of the two) in slipping through his arms in the nick of time.

‘Do you want to kiss *me*,’ I exclaimed, ‘when Minna is in the house!’

‘I have been kissing Minna,’ Fritz answered with perfect gravity, ‘until we are both of us out of breath. I look upon you as a sort of safety-valve.’

At this, Minna’s charming face became eloquent in another way. I only waited to ask for news of my aunt before I withdrew. Mrs. Wagner was already on the road to Frankfort, following Fritz by easy stages.

‘And where is Jack Straw?’ I inquired.

‘Travelling with her,’ said Fritz.

Having received this last extraordinary piece of intelligence, I put off all explanations until a fitter opportunity, and left the lovers together until dinner-time.

It was one of the last fine days of the

autumn. The sunshine tempted me to take a turn in Mr. Engelman's garden.

A shrubbery of evergreens divided the lawn near the house from the flower-beds which occupied the further extremity of the plot of ground. While I was on one side of the shrubbery, I heard the voices of Mr. Keller and Madame Fontaine on the other side. Then, and then only, I remembered that the doctor had suggested a little walking exercise for the invalid, while the sun was at its warmest in the first hours of the afternoon. Madame Fontaine was in attendance, in the absence of Mr. Engelman, engaged in the duties of the office.

I had just turned back again towards the house, thinking it better not to disturb them, when I heard my name on the widow's lips.

Better men than I, under stress of temptation, have been known to commit actions unworthy of them. I was mean enough to listen ; and I paid the proverbial penalty for gratifying my curiosity—I heard no good of myself.

‘You have honoured me by asking my advice, sir,’ I heard Madame Fontaine say. ‘With regard to young David Glenney, I can speak quite impartially. In a few days more, if I can be of no further use to you, I shall have left the house.’

Mr. Keller interrupted her there.

‘Pardon me, Madame Fontaine ; I can’t let you talk of leaving us. We are without a housekeeper, as you know. You will confer a favour on me and on Mr. Engelman, if you will kindly undertake the direction of

our domestic affairs—for the present, at least. Besides, your charming daughter is the light of our household. What will Fritz say, if you take her away just when he has come home? No! no! you and Minna must stay with us.'

'You are only too good to me, sir! Perhaps I had better ascertain what Mr. Engelman's wishes are, before we decide?'

Mr. Keller laughed—and, more extraordinary still, Mr. Keller made a little joke.

'My dear madam, if you don't know what Mr. Engelman's wishes are likely to be, without asking him, you are the most unobservant lady that ever lived! Speak to him, by all means, if you think it formally necessary—and let us return to the question of taking David Glenney into our office here.

A letter which he has lately received from Mrs. Wagner expresses no intention of recalling him to London—and he has managed so cleverly in a business matter which I confided to him, that he would really be an acquisition to us. Besides (until the marriage takes place), he would be a companion for Fritz.’

‘That is exactly where I feel a difficulty,’ Madame Fontaine replied. ‘To my mind, sir, Mr. David is not at all a desirable companion for your son. The admirable candour and simplicity of Fritz’s disposition might suffer by association with a person of Mr. David’s very peculiar character.’

‘May I ask, Madame Fontaine, in what you think his character peculiar?’

‘I will endeavour to express what I feel,

sir. You have spoken of his cleverness. I venture to say that he is *too* clever. And I have observed that he is—for a young man—far too easily moved to suspect others. Do I make myself understood? ’

‘ Perfectly. Pray go on. ’

‘ I find, Mr. Keller, that there is something of the Jesuit about our young friend. He has a way of refining on trifles, and seeing under the surface, where nothing is to be seen. Don’t attach too much importance to what I say ! It is quite likely that I am influenced by the popular prejudice against “old heads on young shoulders.” At the same time, I confess I wouldn’t keep him here, if I were in your place. Shall we move a little further on? ’

Madame Fontaine was, I daresay, per-

fectly right in her estimate of me. Looking back at the pages of this narrative, I discover some places in which I certainly appear to justify her opinion. I even justified it at the time. Before she and Mr. Keller were out of my hearing, I began 'to see under the surface,' and 'to refine' on what she had said.

Was it Jesuitical to doubt the disinterestedness of her advice? I did doubt it. Was it Jesuitical to suspect that she privately distrusted me, and had reasons of her own for keeping me out of her way, at the safe distance of London? I did suspect it.

And yet she was such a good Christian! And yet she had so nobly and so undeniably saved Mr. Keller's life! What right had I to impute self-seeking motives to such a

woman as this? Mean! mean! there was no excuse for me.

I turned back to the house, with my head feeling very old on my young shoulders.

Madame Fontaine's manner to me was so charming, when we all met at the dinner-table, that I fell into a condition of remorseful silence. Fortunately, Fritz took most of the talking on himself, and the general attention was diverted from me. His high spirits, his boisterous nonsense, his contempt for all lawful forms and ceremonies which placed impediments in the way of his speedy marriage, were amusingly contrasted by Mr. Engelman's courteous simplicity in trying to argue the question seriously with his reckless young friend.

‘Don't talk to me about the customary

delays and the parson's duty!' cried Fritz. 'Tell me this: does he do his duty without being paid for it?'

'We must all live,' pleaded good Mr. Engelman; 'the parson must pay the butcher and the baker, like the rest of us.'

'That's shirking the question, my dear sir! Will the parson marry Minna and me, without being paid for it?'

'In all civilised countries, Fritz, there are fees for the performance of the marriage ceremony.'

'Very well. Now follow my train of reasoning, Mr. Engelman! On your own showing, the whole affair is a matter of money. The parson gets his fee for making Minna my wife, after the customary delays.'

There Minna modestly interposed. 'Why

do you object to the customary delays, dear Fritz ? ’

‘ I’ll tell you, my angel, when we are married. In the meantime, I resume my train of reasoning, and I entreat Mr. Engelman not to forget that this is a matter of money. Make it worth the parson’s while to marry us, *without* the customary delays. Double his fee, treble his fee—give him ten times his fee. It’s merely a question of what his reverence can resist. My father is a rich man. Favour me with a blank cheque, papa—and I will make Minna Mrs. Keller before the end of the week ! ’

The father, hitherto content to listen and be amused, checked the son’s flow of nonsense at this point.

‘ There is a time for everything, Fritz,’

he said. 'We have had laughing enough. When you talk of your marriage, I am sorry to observe that you entirely pass over the consideration which is due to your father's only surviving relative.'

Madame Fontaine laid down her knife and fork as if her dinner had come to an end. The sudden appearance in the conversation of the 'surviving relative,' had evidently taken her by surprise. Mr. Keller, observing her, turned away from his son, and addressed himself exclusively to the widow when he spoke next.

'I referred, Madame Fontaine, to my elder sister,' he said. 'She and I are the sole survivors of a large family.'

'Does the lady live in this city, sir?' the widow inquired.

‘No, she still lives in our birthplace—Munich.’

‘May I ask another question?’

‘As many questions, dear madam, as you like.’

‘Is your sister married?’

‘My sister has never been married.’

‘Not for want of suitors,’ said courteous Mr. Engelman. ‘A most majestic person. Witty and accomplished. Possessed of an enviable little fortune, entirely at her own disposal.’

Mr. Keller gently reproved this latter allusion to the question of money.

‘My good friend, Madame Fontaine has a mind above all mercenary considerations. My sister’s place in her esteem and regard will not be influenced by my sister’s fortune,

when they meet (as I hope they will meet) at Fritz's marriage.'

At this, Fritz burst into the conversation in his usual headlong way.

'Oh, dear me, papa, have some consideration for us! If we wait for my aunt, we shall never be married on this side of eternity.'

'Fritz!'

'Don't be angry, sir, I meant no harm. I was thinking of my aunt's asthma. At her age, she will never take the long journey from Munich to Frankfort. Permit me to offer a suggestion. Let us be married first, and then pay her a visit in the honeymoon.'

Mr. Keller passed his son's suggestion over without notice, and addressed himself once more to Madame Fontaine.

‘I propose writing to my sister in a day or two,’ he resumed, ‘to inform her of the contemplated marriage. She already knows your name through Mr. Engelman, who kindly wrote to allay her anxiety about my illness.’

‘And to tell her,’ Mr. Engelman interposed, ‘to whose devotion he owes his recovery.’

The widow received this tribute with eyes fixed modestly on her plate. Her black dress, rising and falling over her bosom, betrayed an agitation, which her enemies at Würzburg might have attributed to the discovery of the rich sister at Munich. Mr. Keller went on—

‘I am sure I may trust to your womanly sympathies to understand the affection which

binds me to my last living relative. My sister's presence at the marriage will be an inexpressible comfort and happiness to me. In spite of what my son has said (you are sadly given to talking at random, Fritz), I believe she will not shrink from the journey to Frankfort, if we only make it easier to her by consulting her health and convenience. Our young people have all their lives before them—our young people can wait.'

‘Certainly, sir.’

She gave that short answer very quietly, with her eyes still on her plate. It was impossible to discover in what frame of mind she viewed the prospect of delay, involved in Mr. Keller's consideration for his sister. For the moment, Fritz was simply confounded. He looked at Minna—re-

covered himself—and favoured his father with another suggestion.

‘I have got it now!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why not spare my aunt the fatigue of the journey? Let us all start for Bavaria to-morrow, and have the marriage at Munich!’

‘And leave the business at Frankfort to take care of itself, at the busiest time of the year!’ his father added ironically. ‘When you open your mouth again, Fritz, put food and drink into it—and confine yourself to that.’

With those words the question of the marriage was closed for the time.

When dinner was over, Mr. Keller retired, to take some rest in his own room. Fritz and his sweetheart left the house

together, on an errand in which they were both equally interested—the purchase of the ring which was to typify Minna's engagement. Left alone with Mr. Engelman and the widow, I felt that I might be an obstacle to confidential conversation, and withdrew to the office. Though not regularly employed as one of the clerks, I had been admitted to serve as a volunteer, since my return from Hanau. In this way, I improved my experience of the details of our business, and I made some small return for the hospitable welcome which I had received from the two partners.

Half an hour or more had passed, when some papers arrived from the bank, which required the signature of the firm. Mr. Engelman being still absent, the head-clerk,

at my suggestion, proceeded to the dining-room with the papers in his charge.

He came back again immediately, looking very much alarmed.

‘Pray go into the dining-room!’ he said to me. ‘I am afraid something is seriously wrong with Mr. Engelman.’

‘Do you mean that he is ill?’ I asked.

‘I can hardly say. His arms are stretched out on the table, and his face is hidden on them. He paid no attention to me. I am almost afraid he was crying.’

Crying? I had left him in excellent spirits, casting glances of the tenderest admiration at Madame Fontaine. Without waiting to hear more, I ran to the dining-room.

He was alone—in the position described by the clerk—and, poor old man, he was

indeed weeping bitterly! I put my hand with all possible gentleness on his shoulder, and said, with the tenderness that I really felt for him: ‘Dear Mr. Engelman, what has happened to distress you?’

At the sound of my voice he looked up, and caught me fervently by the hand.

‘Stay here with me a little while, David,’ he said. ‘I have got my death-blow.’

I sat down by him directly. ‘Try and tell me what has happened,’ I went on. ‘I left you here with Madame Fontaine——’

His tears suddenly ceased; his hand closed convulsively on mine. ‘Don’t speak of her,’ he cried, with an outburst of anger. ‘You were right about her, David. She is a false woman.’ As the words passed his lips, he changed again. His voice faltered; he

seemed to be frightened by his own violent language. ‘Oh, what am I talking about ! what right have I to say that of her ! I am a brute—I am reviling the best of women. It was all my fault, David—I have acted like a madman, like a fool. Oh, my boy ! my boy !—would you believe it ?—I asked her to marry me !’

It is needless to say that I wanted no further explanation. ‘Did she encourage you to ask her ?’ I inquired.

‘I thought she did, David—I thought I would be clever and seize the opportunity. She said she wanted to consult me. She said : ‘Mr. Keller has asked me to stay here, and keep house for you ; I have not given my answer yet, I have waited to know if you approved it.’ Upon that, I said the rash

words. I asked her to be more than our housekeeper—to be my wife. I am naturally stupid,’ said the poor simple gentleman ; ‘ whenever I try to do anything clever I always fail. She was very forbearing with me at first ; she said No, but she said it considerately, as if she felt for me. I presumed on her kindness, like a fool ; I couldn’t help it, David, I was so fond of her. I pressed her to say why she refused me. I was mad enough to ask if there was some other man whom she preferred. Oh, she said some hard things to me in her anger ! And, worse still, when I went down on my knees to her, she said, ‘ Get up, you old fool ! ’—and laughed—and left me. Take me away somewhere, David ; I am too old to get over it, if I stay here. I can never see her or speak to her

again. Take me to England with you—and, oh, don't tell Keller !'

He burst into another fit of tears. It was dreadful to see and hear him.

I tried to think of some consoling words. Before I could give expression to my thought, the door of the room was gently opened ; and Madame Fontaine herself stood before us. Her eyes looked at Mr. Engelman from under their heavy lids, with a quiet and scornful compassion. The poor wretch was of no further use to her. Quite needless to be on her best behaviour with him now !

'There is not the least occasion, sir, to disturb yourself,' she said. 'It is *my* duty to leave the house—and I will do it.'

Without waiting to be answered, she turned back to the door, and left us.

CHAPTER XXII.

‘FOR heaven’s sake, sir, allow me to go!’

‘On no account, Madame Fontaine. If you won’t remain here, in justice to yourself, remain as a favour to me.’

When I opened my bedroom door the next morning, the widow and Mr. Keller were on the landing outside, and those were the words exchanged between them.

Mr. Keller approached, and spoke to me.

‘What do you know, David, about the disappearance of Mr. Engelman?’

‘Disappearance?’ I repeated. ‘I was with him yesterday evening—and I bade him good-night in his own room.’

He must have left the house before the servants were up this morning,’ said Mr. Keller. ‘Read that.’

He handed me a morsel of paper with writing on it in pencil:—

‘Forgive me, dear friend and partner, for leaving you without saying good-bye; also for burdening you with the direction of business, before you are perhaps strong enough to accept the charge. My mind is in such a state of confusion that I should be worse than useless in the office. While I write this, my poor weak head burns as if there was fire in it. I cannot face *her*, I cannot face *you*—I must go, before I lose

all control over myself. Don't attempt to trace me. If change and absence restore me to myself I will return. If not, a man at my age and in my state of mind is willing to die. Please tell Madame Fontaine that I ask her pardon with all my heart. Good-bye—and God bless and prosper you.'

I was unaffectedly distressed. There was something terrible in this sudden break-up of poor Engelman's harmless life—something cruel and shocking in the passion of love fixing its relentless hold on an innocent old man, fast nearing the end of his days. There are hundreds of examples of this deplorable anomaly in real life; and yet, when we meet with it in our own experience, we are always taken by surprise,

and always ready to express doubt or derision when we hear of it in the experience of others.

Madame Fontaine behaved admirably. She sat down on the window-seat at the end the landing, and wrung her hands with a gesture of despair.

‘Oh!’ she said, ‘if he had asked me for anything else! If I could have made any other sacrifice to him! God knows I never dreamed of it; I never gave him the smallest encouragement. We might have all been so happy together here—and I, who would have gone to the world’s end to serve Mr. Keller and Mr. Engelman, I am the unhappy creature who has broken up the household!’

Mr. Keller was deeply affected. He sat

down on the window-seat by Madame Fontaine.

‘My dear, dear lady,’ he said, ‘you are entirely blameless in this matter. Even my unfortunate partner feels it, and asks your pardon. If inquiries can discover him, they shall be set on foot immediately. In the meantime, let me entreat you to compose yourself. Engelman has perhaps done wisely, to leave us for a time. He will get over his delusion, and all may be well yet.’

I went downstairs, not caring to hear more. All my sympathies, I confess, were with Mr. Engelman—though he *was* a fat simple old man. Mr. Keller seemed to me (here is more of the ‘old head on young shoulders!’) to have gone from one extreme to the other. He had begun by treating the

widow with unbecoming injustice; and he was now flattering her with unreasonable partiality.

For the next few days there was tranquillity, if not happiness, in the house. Mr. Keller wrote to his sister at Munich, inviting her to mention the earliest date at which it might suit her convenience to be present at the marriage of his son. Madame Fontaine assumed the regular management of our domestic affairs. Fritz and Minna found sufficient attraction in each other's society. The new week was just beginning, and our inquiries after Mr. Engelman had thus far led to no result—when I received a letter containing news of the fugitive, confided to me under strict reserve.

The writer of the letter proved to be a

married younger brother of Mr. Engelman, residing at Bingen, on the Rhine.

‘ I write to you, dear sir, at my brother’s request. My wife and I are doing all that we can to relieve and comfort him, but his mind has not yet sufficiently recovered to enable him to write to you himself. He desires to thank you heartily for your sympathy, at the most trying period of his life ; and he trusts to your kindness to let him hear, from time to time, of Mr. Keller’s progress towards recovery, and of the well-being of the business. In addressing your letters to me at Bingen, you will be pleased to consider the information of my brother’s whereabouts herein afforded to you as strictly confidential, until you hear from me to the contrary. In his present frame of

mind, it would be in the last degree painful to him to be made the subject of inquiries, remonstrances, or entreaties to return.'

The arrival of this sad news proved to be not the only noteworthy event of the day. While I was still thinking of poor Mr. Engelman, Fritz came into the office with his hat in his hand.

'Minna is not in very good spirits this morning,' he said. 'I am going to take her out for half an hour to look at the shops. Can you come with us?'

This invitation rather surprised me. 'Does Minna wish it?' I asked.

Fritz dropped his voice so that the clerks in the room could not hear his reply. 'Minna has sent me to you,' he answered.

‘She is uneasy about her mother. I can make nothing of it—and she wants to ask your advice.’

It was impossible for me to leave my desk at that moment. We arranged to put off the walk until after dinner. During the meal, I observed that not Minna only, but her mother also, appeared to be out of spirits. Mr. Keller and Fritz probably noticed the change as I did. We were all of us more silent than usual. It was a relief to find myself with the lovers, out in the cheerful street.

Minna seemed to want to be encouraged before she could speak to me. I was obliged to ask in plain words if anything had happened to annoy her mother and herself.

‘I hardly know how to tell you,’ she said. ‘I am very unhappy about my mother.’

‘Begin at the beginning,’ Fritz suggested ; ‘tell him where you went, and what happened yesterday.’

Minna followed her instructions. ‘Mamma and I went to our lodgings yesterday,’ she began. ‘We had given notice to leave when it was settled we were to live in Mr. Keller’s house. The time was nearly up ; and there were some few things still left at the apartments, which we could carry away in our hands. Mamma, who speaks considerately to everybody, said she hoped the landlady would soon let the rooms again. The good woman answered : “I don’t quite know, madam, whether I have not let them

already.”—Don’t you think that rather a strange reply?’

‘It seems to require some explanation, certainly. What did the landlady say?’

‘The landlady’s explanation explained nothing,’ Fritz interposed. ‘She appears to have spoken of a mysterious stranger, who had once before inquired if Madame Fontaine was likely to leave the lodgings—and who came yesterday to inquire again. You tell him the rest of it, Minna.’

Before she could speak, I had already recognised the suspicious-looking personage whom Mr. Engelman and I had some time since encountered on the door-step. I inquired what the man had said when he heard that the lodgings were to let.

‘There is the suspicious part of it,’ cried

Fritz. ‘Be very particular, Minna, to leave nothing out.’

Fritz’s interruptions seemed only to confuse Minna. I begged him to be silent, and did my best to help her to find the lost thread of her story.

‘Did the man ask to see the lodgings?’
I said.

‘No.’

‘Did he talk of taking the lodgings?’

‘He said he wished to have the refusal of them until the evening,’ Minna replied ;
‘and then he asked if Madame Fontaine had left Frankfort. When the landlady said No, he had another question ready directly. He wanted to know in what part of Frankfort Madame Fontaine was now living.’

‘And the old fool of a landlady actually

told him the address,' said Fritz, interrupting again.

'And, I am afraid, did some serious mischief by her folly,' Minna added. 'I saw mamma start and turn pale. She said to the landlady, "How long ago did this happen?" "About half an hour ago," the landlady answered. "Which way did he turn when he left you—towards Mr. Keller's house or the other way?" The landlady said, "Towards Mr. Keller's house." Without another word, mamma took me by the arm. "It's time we were home again," she said—and we went back at once to the house.'

'You were too late, of course, to find the man there?'

'Yes, David—but we heard of him.'

Mamma asked Joseph if anyone had called while we were out. Joseph said a stranger had called, and had inquired if Madame Fontaine was at home. Hearing that she was out, he had said, "I think I had better write to her. She is here for a short time only, I believe?" And innocent Joseph answered, "Oh, dear no! Madame Fontaine is Mr. Keller's new housekeeper." "Well?" mamma asked, "and what did he say when he heard that?" "He said nothing," Joseph answered, "and went away directly."

'Was that all that passed between your mother and Joseph?'

'All,' Minna replied. 'My mother wouldn't even let *me* speak to her. I only tried to say a few words of sympathy—and I was told sharply to be silent. "Don't in-

interrupt me," she said, "I want to write a letter." "

‘Did you see the letter?’

‘Oh, no! But I was so anxious and uneasy that I did peep over her shoulder while she was writing the address.’

‘Do you remember what it was?’

‘I only saw the last word on it. The last word was “Würzburg.”’

‘Now you know as much as we do,’ Fritz resumed. ‘How does it strike you, David? And what do you advise?’

How could I advise? I could only draw my own conclusions privately. Madame Fontaine’s movements were watched by somebody; possibly in the interests of the stranger who now held the promissory note. It was, of course, impossible for me to com-

municate this view of the circumstances to either of my two companions. I could only suggest a patient reliance on time, and the preservation of discreet silence on Minna's part, until her mother set the example of returning to the subject.

My vaguely-prudent counsels were, naturally enough, not to the taste of my young hearers. Fritz openly acknowledged that I had disappointed him ; and Minna turned aside her head, with a look of reproach. Her quick perception had detected, in my look and manner, that I was keeping my thoughts to myself. Neither she nor Fritz made any objection to my leaving them, to return to the office before post-time. I wrote to Mr. Engelman before I left my desk that evening.

Recalling those memorable days of my early life, I remember that a strange and sinister depression pervaded our little household, from the time when Mr. Engelman left us.

In some mysterious way the bonds of sympathy, by which we had been hitherto more or less united, seemed to slacken and fall away. We lived on perfectly good terms with one another; but there was an unrecognised decrease of confidence among us, which I for one felt sometimes almost painfully. An unwholesome atmosphere of distrust enveloped us. Mr. Keller only believed, under reserve, that Madame Fontaine's persistent low spirits were really attributable, as she said, to nothing more important than nervous headaches. Fritz

began to doubt whether Mr. Keller was really as well satisfied as he professed to be with the choice that his son had made of a portionless bride. Minna, observing that Fritz was occasionally rather more subdued and silent than usual, began to ask herself whether she was quite as dear to him, in the time of their prosperity, as in the time of their adversity. To sum up all, Madame Fontaine had her doubts of me—and I had my doubts (although she *had* saved Mr. Keller's life) of Madame Fontaine.

From this degrading condition of dullness and distrust, we were roused, one morning, by the happy arrival of Mrs. Wagner, attended by her maid, her courier—and Jack Straw.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CIRCUMSTANCES had obliged my aunt to perform the last stage of her journey to Frankfort by the night mail. She had only stopped at our house on her way to the hotel; being unwilling to trespass on the hospitality of her partners, while she was accompanied by such a half-witted fellow as Jack. Mr. Keller, however, refused even to hear of the head partner in the business being reduced to accept a mercenary welcome at an hotel. One whole side of the house, situated immediately over the offices, had been already put in order in

anticipation of Mrs. Wagner's arrival. The luggage was then and there taken off the carriage ; and my aunt was obliged, by all the laws of courtesy and good fellowship, to submit.

This information was communicated to me by Joseph, on my return from an early visit to one of our warehouses at the riverside. When I asked if I could see my aunt, I was informed that she had already retired to rest in her room, after the fatigue of a seven hours' journey by night.

‘ And where is Jack Straw ? ’ I asked.

‘ Playing the devil already, sir, with the rules of the house,’ Joseph answered.

Fritz's voice hailed me from the lower regions.

‘Come down, David; here’s something worth seeing!’

I descended at once to the servants’ offices. There, crouched up in a corner of the cold stone corridor which formed the medium of communication between the kitchen and the stairs, I saw Jack Straw again—in the very position in which I had found him at Bedlam; excepting the prison, the chains, and the straw.

But for his prematurely grey hair and the strange yellow pallor of his complexion, I doubt if I should have recognised him again. He looked fat and happy; he was neatly and becomingly dressed, with a flower in his button-hole and rosettes on his shoes. In one word, so far as his costume was concerned, he might have been taken for a

lady's page, dressed under the superintendence of his mistress herself.

‘There he is!’ said Fritz, ‘and there he means to remain, till your aunt wakes and sends for him.’

‘Upsetting the women servants, on their way to their work,’ Joseph added, with an air of supreme disgust—‘and freezing in that cold corner, when he might be sitting comfortably by the kitchen fire!’

Jack listened to this with an ironical expression of approval. ‘That’s very well said, Joseph,’ he remarked. ‘Come here; I want to speak to you. Do you see that bell?’ He pointed to a row of bells running along the upper wall of the corridor, and singled out one of them which was numbered ten. ‘They tell me that’s the bell of Mis-

tress's bedroom,' he resumed, still speaking of my aunt by the name which he had first given to her on the day when they met in the madhouse. 'Very well, Joseph! I don't want to be in anybody's way; but no person in the house must see that bell ring before me. Here I stay till Mistress rings—and then you will get rid of me; I shall move to the mat outside her door, and wait till she whistles for me. Now you may go. That's a poor half-witted creature,' he said as Joseph retired. 'Lord! what a lot of them there are in this world!' Fritz burst out laughing. 'I'm afraid you're another of them,' said Jack, looking at him with an expression of the sincerest compassion.

'Do you remember me?' I asked.

Jack nodded his head in a patronising

way. ‘Oh, yes—Mistress has been talking of you. I know you both. You’re David, and he’s Fritz. All right! all right!’

‘What sort of journey from London have you had?’ I inquired next.

He stretched out his shapely little arms and legs, and yawned. ‘Oh, a pretty good journey. We should have been better without the courier and the maid. The courier is a tall man. I have no opinion of tall men. I am a man myself of five foot—that’s the right height for a courier. I could have done all the work, and saved Mistress the money. Her maid is another tall person; clumsy with her fingers. I could dress Mistress’s hair a deal better than the maid, if she would only let me. The fact is, I want to do everything for her myself. I shall

never be quite happy till I'm the only servant she has about her.'

'Ah, yes,' said Fritz, good-naturedly sympathising with him. 'You're a grateful little man; you remember what Mrs. Wagner has done for you.'

'Remember?' Jack repeated scornfully. 'I say, if you can't talk more sensibly than that, you had better hold your tongue.' He turned and appealed to me. 'Did you ever hear anything like Fritz? He seems to think it wonderful that I remember the day when she took me out of Bedlam!'

'Ah, Jack, that was a great day in your life, wasn't it?'

'A great day? Oh, good Lord in Heaven! where are there words that are big enough to speak about it?' He sprang to

his feet, wild with the sudden tumult of his own recollections. ‘The sun—the warm, golden, glorious, beautiful sun—met us when we came out of the gates, and all but drove me stark-staring-mad with the joy of it! Forty thousand devils—little straw-coloured, lively, tempting devils—(mind, I counted them!)—all crawled over me together. They sat on my shoulders—and they tickled my hands—and they scrambled in my hair—and they were all in one cry at me like a pack of dogs. “Now, Jack! we are waiting for you; your chains are off, and the sun’s shining, and Mistress’s carriage is at the gate—join us, Jack, in a good yell; a fine, tearing, screeching, terrifying, mad yell!” I dropped on my knees, down in the bottom of the carriage; and I held on by the skirts

of Mistress's dress. "Look at me!" I said; "I won't burst out; I won't frighten you, if I die for it. Only help me with your eyes! only look at me!" And she put me on the front seat of the carriage, opposite her, and she never took her eyes off me all the way through the streets till we got to the house. "I believe in you, Jack," she said. And I wouldn't even open my lips to answer her—I was so determined to be quiet. Ha! ha! how you two fellows would have yelled, in my place!' He sat down again in his corner, delighted with his own picture of the two fellows who would have yelled in his place.

‘And what did Mistress do with you when she brought you home?’ I asked.

His gaiety suddenly left him. He lifted

one of his hands, and waved it to and fro gently in the air.

‘You are too loud, David,’ he said. ‘All this part of it must be spoken softly—because all this part of it is beautiful, and kind, and good. There was a picture in the room, of angels and their harps. I wish I had the angels and the harps to help me tell you about it. Fritz there came in with us, and called it a bedroom. I knew better than that; I called it Heaven. You see, I thought of the prison and the darkness and the cold and the chains and the straw—and I named it Heaven. You two may say what you please; Mistress said I was right.’

He closed his eyes with a luxurious sense of self-esteem, and appeared to absorb himself in his own thoughts. Fritz uninten-

tionally roused him by continuing the story of Jack's introduction to the bedroom.

‘ Our little friend,’ Fritz began confidentially, ‘ did the strangest things when he found himself in his new room. It was a cold day ; and he insisted on letting the fire out. Then he looked at the bed-clothes, and——’

Jack solemnly opened his eyes again, and stopped the narrative at that point.

‘ You are not the right person to speak of it,’ he said. ‘ Nobody must speak of it but a person who understands me. You shan’t be disappointed, David. I understand myself—I’ll tell you about it. You saw what sort of place I lived in and slept in at the madhouse, didn’t you ? ’

‘I saw it, Jack—and I can never forget it.’

‘Now just think of my having a room, to begin with. And add, if you please, a fire—and a light—and a bed—and blankets and sheets and pillows—and clothes, splendid new clothes, for Me! And then ask yourself if any man could bear it, all pouring on him at once (not an hour after he had left Bedlam), without going clean out of his senses and screeching for joy? No, no. If I have a quality, it’s profound common sense. Down I went on my knees before her again! “If you have any mercy on me, Mistress, let me have all this by a bit at a time. Upon my soul, I can’t swallow it at once!” She understood me. We let the fire out—and surprised that deficient person,

Fritz. A little of the Bedlam cold kept me nice and quiet. The bed that night if you like—but Heaven defend me from the blankets and the sheets and the pillows till I'm able to bear them! And as to putting on coat, waistcoat, and breeches, all together, the next morning—it was as much as I could do, when I saw myself in my breeches, to give the word of command in the voice of a gentleman—"Away with the rest of them! The shirt for to-morrow, the waistcoat for next day, and the coat—if I can bear the sight of it without screaming—the day after!" A gradual process, you see, David. And every morning Mistress helped me by saying the words she said in the carriage, "I believe in you, Jack." You ask her, when she gets up, if I ever once frightened

her, from the day when she took me home.' He looked again, with undiminished resentment, at Fritz. '*Now* do you understand what I did when I got into my new room? Is Fritz in the business, David? He'll want a deal of looking after if he is. Just step this way—I wish to speak to you.'

He got up again, and taking my arm with a look of great importance, led me a few steps away—but not far enough to be out of sight of my aunt's bell.

'I say,' he began, 'I've heard they call this place Frankfort. Am I right?'

'Quite right!'

'And there's a business here, like the business in London?'

'Certainly.'

‘ And Mistress *is* Mistress here, like she is in London ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Very well, then, I want to know something. What about the Keys ? ’

I looked at him, entirely at a loss to understand what this last question meant. He stamped his foot impatiently.

‘ Do you mean to say, David, you have never heard what situation I held in the London office ? ’

‘ Never, Jack ! ’

He drew himself up and folded his arms, and looked at me from the immeasurable height of his own superiority.

‘ I was Keeper of the Keys in London ! ’ he announced. ‘ And what I want to know is—Am I to be Keeper of the Keys here ? ’

It was now plain enough that my aunt—proceeding on the wise plan of always cultivating the poor creature's sense of responsibility—had given him some keys to take care of, and had put him on his honour to be worthy of his little trust. I could not doubt that she would find some means of humouring him in the same way at Frankfort.

‘Wait till the bell rings,’ I answered, ‘and perhaps you will find the Keys waiting for you in Mistress's room.’

He rubbed his hands in delight. ‘That's it!’ he said. ‘Let's keep watch on the bell.’

As he turned to go back again to his corner, Madame Fontaine's voice reached us from the top of the kitchen stairs. She was

speaking to her daughter. Jack stopped directly and waited, looking round at the stairs.

‘Where is the other person who came here with Mrs. Wagner?’ the widow asked. ‘A man with an odd English name. Do you know, Minna, if they have found a room for him?’

She reached the lower stair as she spoke—advanced along the corridor—and discovered Jack Straw. In an instant, her languid indifferent manner disappeared. Her eyes opened wildly under their heavy lids. She stood motionless, like a woman petrified by surprise—perhaps by terror.

‘Hans Grimm!’ I heard her say to herself. ‘God in heaven! what brings *him* here?’

CHAPTER XXIV.

ALMOST instantaneously Madame Fontaine recovered her self-control.

‘I really couldn’t help feeling startled,’ she said, explaining herself to Fritz and to me. ‘The last time I saw this man, he was employed in a menial capacity at the University of Würzburg. He left us one day, nobody knew why. And he suddenly appears again, without a word of warning, in this house.’

I looked at Jack. A smile of mischievous satisfaction was on his face. He apparently enjoyed startling Madame Fon-

taine. His expression changed instantly for the better, when Minna approached and spoke to him.

‘Don’t you remember me, Hans?’ she said.

‘Oh, yes, Missie, I remember you. You are a good creature. You take after your papa. *He* was a good creature—except when he had his beastly medical bottles in his hand. But, I say, I mustn’t be called by the name they gave me at the University! I was a German then—I am an Englishman now. All nations are alike to me. But I am particular about my name, because it’s the name Mistress knew me by. I will never have another. “Jack Straw,” if you please. There’s my name, and I am proud of it. Lord! what an ugly little hat you

have got on your head! I'll soon make you a better one.' He turned on Madame Fontaine, with a sudden change to distrust.

'I don't like the way you spoke of my leaving the University, just now. I had a right to go, if I liked—hadn't I?'

'Oh, yes, Hans.'

'Not Hans! Didn't you hear what I mentioned just now? Say Jack.'

She said it, with a ready docility which a little surprised me.

'Did I steal anything at the University?'

Jack proceeded.

'Not that I know of.'

'Then speak respectfully of me, next time. Say, "Mr. Jack retired from the University, in the exercise of his discretion."' Having stated this formula with an air of

great importance, he addressed himself to me. 'I appeal to you,' he said. 'Suppose you had lost your colour here' (he touched his cheek), 'and your colour there' (he touched his hair); 'and suppose it had happened at the University—would *you*' (he stood on tip-toe, and whispered the next words in my ear) 'would *you* have stopped there, to be poisoned again? No!' he cried, raising his voice once more, 'you would have drifted away like me. From Germany to France; from France to England—and so to London, and so under the feet of her Highness's horses, and so to Bedlam, and so to Mistress. Oh, Lord help me, I'm forgetting the bell! good-bye, all of you. Let me be in my corner till the bell rings.'

Madame Fontaine glanced at me compassionately, and touched her head.

‘Come to my sitting-room, Jack,’ she said, ‘and have something to eat and drink, and tell me your adventures after you left Würzburg.’

She favoured him with her sweetest smile, and spoke in her most ingratiating tones. That objectionable tendency of mine to easily suspect others was, I suppose, excited once more. At any rate, I thought the widow showed a very remarkable anxiety to conciliate Jack. He was proof, however, against all attempts at fascination—he shook his head obstinately, and pointed to the bell. We went our several ways, and left the strange little man crouched up in his corner.

In the afternoon, I was sent for to see my aunt.

I found Jack at his post ; established in a large empty wardrobe, on the landing outside his mistress's door. His fingers were already busy with the framework of the new straw hat which he had promised to make for Minna.

‘ All right, David ! ’ he said, patronising me as indulgently as ever. ‘ Mistress has had her good sleep and her nice breakfast, and she looks lovely. Go in, and see her—go in ! ’

I thought myself that she looked perhaps a little worn, and certainly thinner than when I had seen her last. But these were trifles. It is not easy to describe the sense of relief and pleasure that I felt—after having been

accustomed to the sleepy eyes and serpentine graces of Madame Fontaine—when I looked again at the lithe active figure and the bright well-opened grey eyes of my dear little English aunt.

‘Tell me, David,’ she began, as soon as the first greetings were over, ‘what do you think of Jack Straw? Was my poor dear husband not right? and have I not done well to prove it?’

I could, and did, honestly congratulate her on the result of the visit to Bedlam.

‘And now about the people here,’ she went on. ‘I find Fritz’s father completely changed on the subject of Fritz’s marriage. And when I ask what it means, I am told that Madame Fontaine has set everything right, in the most wonderful

manner, by saving Mr. Keller's life. Is this true ?'

'Quite true. What do you think of Madame Fontaine?'

'Ask me that, David, to-morrow or the next day. My head is muddled by travelling—I have not made up my mind yet.'

'Have you seen Minna?'

'Seen her, and kissed her too ! There's a girl after my own heart. I consider our scatter-brained friend Fritz to be the luckiest young fellow living.'

'If Minna was not going to be married,' I suggested, 'she would just do for one of your young-lady clerks, wouldn't she?'

My aunt laughed. 'Exactly what I thought myself, when I saw her. But you are not to make a joke of my young-lady

clerks. I am positively determined to carry out that useful reform in the office here. However, as Mr. Keller has been so lately ill, and as we are sure to have a fight about it, I will act considerately towards my opponent—I won't stir in the matter until he is quite himself again. In the meantime, I must find somebody, while I am away, to take my place in the London house. The business is now under the direction of Mr. Hartrey. He is perfectly competent to carry it on; but, as you know, our excellent head-clerk has his old-fashioned prejudices. According to strict rule, a partner ought always to be in command, at the London business—and Hartrey implores me (if Mr. Keller is not well enough to take the journey) to send Mr. Engelman to London. Where *is* Mr. Engel-

man? How is it that I have neither heard nor seen anything of him? ’

This was a delicate and difficult question to answer—at least, to my way of thinking. There was little prospect of keeping the poor old gentleman’s sad secret. It was known to Fritz and Minna, as well as to Mr. Keller. Still, I felt an unconquerable reluctance to be the first person who revealed the disaster that had befallen him.

‘Mr. Engelman is not in good health and spirits,’ I said. ‘He has gone away for a little rest and change.’

My aunt looked astonished.

‘Both the partners ill!’ she exclaimed. ‘I remember Mr. Engelman, in the days when I was first married. He used to boast of never having had a day’s illness in

his life. Not at all a clever man—but good as gold, and a far more sensitive person than most people gave him credit for being. He promised to be fat as years grew on him. Has he kept his promise? What is the matter with him?’

I hesitated. My aunt eyed me sharply, and put another question before I had quite made up my mind what to say.

‘If you can’t tell me what is the matter with him, can you tell me where he is? I may want to write to him.’

I hesitated again. Mr. Engelman’s address had been confidentially communicated to me, for reasons which I was bound to respect. ‘I am afraid I can’t answer that question either,’ I said awkwardly enough.

‘Good heavens!’ cried my aunt, ‘what

does all this mystery mean? Has Mr. Engelman killed a man in a duel? or run away with an opera-dancer? or squandered the whole profits of the business at the gambling-table? or what?' As she put these bold views of the case, we heard voices outside, followed by a gentle knock at the door. Minna entered the room with a message.

‘Mamma has sent me, Mrs. Wagner, to ask at what time you would like to dine.’

‘My dear, I am much obliged to your mother. I have only just breakfasted, and I can wait quite well till supper-time comes. Stop a minute! Here is my nephew driving me to the utmost verge of human endurance, by making a mystery of Mr. Engelman’s absence from Frankfort. Should I be very indiscreet if I asked——Good gracious, how

the girl blushes! You are evidently in the secret too, Miss Minna. *Is* it an operadancer? Leave us together, David.'

This made Minna's position simply unendurable. She looked at me appealingly. I did at last, what I ought to have done at first—I spoke out plainly.

'The fact is, aunt,' I said, 'poor Mr. Engelman has left us for awhile, sadly mortified and distressed. He began by admiring Madame Fontaine; and he ended in making her an offer of marriage.'

'Mamma was indeed truly sorry for him,' Minna added; 'but she had no other alternative than to refuse him, of course.'

'Upon my word, child, I see no "ot course" in the matter!' my aunt answered sharply.

Minna was shocked. ‘Oh, Mrs. Wagner! Mr. Engelman is more than twenty years older than mamma—and (I am sure I pity him, poor man)—and *so fat!*’

‘Fat is a matter of taste,’ my aunt remarked, more and more resolute in taking Mr. Engelman’s part. ‘And as for his being twenty years older than your mother, I can tell you, young lady, that my dear lost husband was twenty years my senior when he married me—and a happier couple never lived. I know more of the world than you do; and I say Madame Fontaine has made a great mistake. She has thrown away an excellent position in life, and has pained and humiliated one of the kindest-hearted men living. No! no! I am not going to argue the matter with you now; I’ll wait

till you are married to Fritz. But I own I should like to speak to your mother about it. Ask her to favour me by stepping this way for a few minutes, when she has nothing to do.'

Minna seemed to think this rather a high-handed method of proceeding, and entered a modest protest accordingly.

'Mamma is a very sensitive person,' she began with dignity.

My aunt stopped her with a pat on the cheek.

'Good child! I like you for taking your mother's part. Mamma has another merit, my dear. She is old enough to understand me better than you do. Go and fetch her.'

Minna left us, with her pretty little head carried high in the air. 'Mrs. Wagner is a

person entirely without sentiment!’ she indignantly whispered to me in passing, when I opened the door for her.

‘I declare that girl is absolute perfection!’ my aunt exclaimed with enthusiasm. ‘The one thing she wanted, as I thought, was spirit—and I find she has got it. Ah! she will take Fritz in hand, and make something of him. He is one of the many men who absolutely need being henpecked. I prophesy confidently—their marriage will be a happy one.’

‘I don’t doubt it, aunt. But tell me, what are you going to say to Madame Fontaine?’

‘It depends on circumstances. I must know first if Mr. Engelman has really set his heart on the woman with the snaky move-

ments and the sleepy eyes. Can you certify to that ?’

‘Positively. Her refusal has completely crushed him.’

‘Very well. Then I mean to make Madame Fontaine marry him—always supposing there is no other man in his way.’

‘My dear aunt, how you talk! At Madame Fontaine’s age! With a grown-up daughter!’

‘My dear nephew, you know absolutely nothing about women. Counting by years, I grant you they grow old. Counting by sensations, they remain young to the end of their days. Take a word of advice from me. The evidence of their grey hair may look indisputable; the evidence of their grown-up children may look indisputable.

Don't believe it ! There is but one period in the women's lives when you may feel quite certain that they have definitely given the men their dismissal—the period when they are put in their coffins. Hush ! What's that outside ? When there is a noisy silk dress and a silent foot on the stairs, in this house, I know already what it means. Be off with you !'

She was quite right. Madame Fontaine entered, as I rose to leave the room.

The widow showed none of her daughter's petulance. She was sweet and patient ; she saluted Mrs. Wagner with a sad smile which seemed to say, ' Outrage my most sacred feelings, dear madam ; they are entirely at your disposal.' If I had believed that my aunt had the smallest chance of carrying her

point, I should have felt far from easy about Mr. Engelman's prospects. As it was, I left the two ladies to their fruitless interview, and returned composedly to my work.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHEN supper was announced, I went upstairs again to show my aunt the way to the room in which we took our meals.

‘ Well ? ’ I said.

‘ Well,’ she answered coolly, ‘ Madame Fontaine has promised to reconsider it.’

I confess I was staggered. By what possible motives could the widow have been animated? Even Mr. Engelman’s passive assistance was now of no further importance to her. She had gained Mr. Keller’s confidence ; her daughter’s marriage was assured ; her employment in the house offered her a

liberal salary, a respectable position, and a comfortable home. Why should she consent to reconsider the question of marrying a man, in whom she could not be said to feel any sort of true interest, in any possible acceptance of the words? I began to think that my aunt was right, and that I really did know absolutely nothing about women.

At supper Madame Fontaine and her daughter were both unusually silent. Open-hearted Minna was not capable of concealing that her mother's concession had been made known to her in some way, and that the disclosure had disagreeably surprised her. However, there was no want of gaiety at the table—thanks to my aunt, and to her faithful attendant.

Jack Straw followed us into the room, without waiting to be invited, and placed himself, to Joseph's disgust, behind Mrs. Wagner's chair.

‘Nobody waits on Mistress at table,’ he explained, ‘but me. Sometimes she gives me a bit or a drink over her shoulder. Very little drink—just a sip, and no more. I quite approve of only a sip myself. Oh, I know how to behave. None of your wine-merchant's fire in *my* head; no Bedlam breaking loose again. Make your minds easy. There are no cooler brains among you than mine.’ At this, Fritz burst into one of his explosions of laughter. Jack appealed to Fritz's father, with unruffled gravity. ‘Your son, I believe, sir? Ha! what a blessing it is there's plenty of room

for improvement in that young man. I only throw out a remark. If I was afflicted with a son myself, I think I should prefer David.'

This specimen of Jack's method of asserting himself, and other similar outbreaks which Fritz and I mischievously encouraged, failed apparently to afford any amusement to Madame Fontaine. Once she roused herself to ask Mr. Keller if his sister had written to him from Munich. Hearing that no reply had been received, she relapsed into silence. The old excuse of a nervous headache was repeated, when Mr. Keller and my aunt politely inquired if anything was amiss.

When the letters were delivered the next morning, two among them were not con-

nected with the customary business of the office. One (with the postmark of Bingen) was for me. And one (with the postmark of Würzburg) was for Madame Fontaine. I sent it upstairs to her immediately.

When I opened my own letter, I found sad news of poor Mr. Engelman. Time and change had failed to improve his spirits. He complained of a feeling of fulness and oppression in his head, and of hissing noises in his ears, which were an almost constant annoyance to him. On two occasions he had been cupped, and had derived no more than a temporary benefit from the employment of that remedy. His doctor recommended strict attention to diet, and regular exercise. He submitted willingly to the severest rules at table—but there was

no rousing him to exert himself in any way. For hours together, he would sit silent in one place, half sleeping, half waking; noticing no one, and caring for nothing but to get to his bed as soon as possible.

This statement of the case seemed to me to suggest very grave considerations. I could no longer hesitate to inform Mr. Keller that I had received intelligence of his absent partner, and to place my letter in his hands.

Whatever little disagreements there had been between them were instantly forgotten. I had never before seen Mr. Keller so distressed and so little master of himself.

‘I must go to Engelman directly,’ he said.

I ventured to submit that there were two serious objections to his doing this: In the first place, his presence in the office was absolutely necessary. In the second place, his sudden appearance at Bingen would prove to be a serious, perhaps a fatal, shock to his old friend.

‘What is to be done, then?’ he exclaimed.

‘I think my aunt may be of some use, sir, in this emergency.’

‘Your aunt? How can she help us?’

I informed him of my aunt’s project; and I added that Madame Fontaine had not positively said No. He listened without conviction, frowning and shaking his head.

‘Mrs. Wagner is a very impetuous

person,' he said. 'She doesn't understand a complex nature like Madame Fontaine's.'

'At least I may show my aunt the letter from Bingen, sir?'

'Yes. It can do no harm, if it does no good.'

On my way to my aunt's room, I encountered Minna on the stairs. She was crying. I naturally asked what was the matter.

'Don't stop me!' was the only answer I received.

'But where are you going, Minna?'

'I am going to Fritz, to be comforted.'

'Has anybody behaved harshly to you?'

'Yes, mamma has behaved harshly to me. For the first time in my life,' said the spoilt

child, with a strong sense of injury, ‘ she has locked the door of her room, and refused to let me in.’

‘ But why ? ’

‘ How can I tell? I believe it has something to do with that horrid man I told you of. You sent a letter upstairs this morning. I met Joseph on the landing, and took the letter to her myself. Why shouldn’t I look at the postmark? Where was the harm in saying to her, “ A letter, mamma, from Würzburg ”? She looked at me as if I had mortally offended her—and pointed to the door, and locked herself in. I have knocked twice, and asked her to forgive me. Not a word of answer either time! I consider myself insulted. Let me go to Fritz.’

I made no attempt to detain her. She

had set those ever-ready suspicions of mine at work again.

Was the letter which I had sent upstairs a reply to the letter which Minna had seen her mother writing? Was the widow now informed that the senile old admirer who had advanced the money to pay her creditors had been found dead in his bed? and that her promissory note had passed into the possession of the heir-at-law? If this was the right reading of the riddle, no wonder she had sent her daughter out of the room—no wonder she had locked her door!

My aunt wasted no time in expressions of grief and surprise, when she was informed of Mr. Engelman's state of health. 'Send the widow here directly,' she said. 'If there is anything like a true heart under that

splendid silk dress of hers, I shall write and relieve poor Engelman by to-night's post.'

To confide my private surmises, even to my aunt, would have been an act of inexcusable imprudence, to say the least of it. I could only reply that Madame Fontaine was not very well, and was (as I had heard from Minna) shut up in the retirement of her own room.

The resolute little woman got on her feet instantly. 'Show me where she is, David—and leave the rest to me.'

I led her to the door, and was dismissed with these words—'Go and wait in my room till I come back to you.' As I retired, I heard a smart knock, and my aunt's voice announcing herself outside—'Mrs. Wagner, ma'am, with something serious

to say to you.' The reply was inaudible. Not so my aunt's rejoinder: 'Oh, very well! Just read that letter, will you? I'll push it under the door, and wait for an answer.' I lingered for a minute longer—and heard the door opened and closed again.

In little more than half an hour, my aunt returned. She looked serious and thoughtful. I at once anticipated that she had failed. Her first words informed me that I was wrong.

'I've done it,' she said. 'I am to write to Engelman to-night; and I have the widow's permission to tell him that she regrets her hasty decision. Her own words, mind, when I asked her how I should put it!'

‘So there *is* a true heart under that splendid silk dress of hers?’ I said.

My aunt walked up and down the room, silent and frowning—discontented with me, or discontented with herself; it was impossible to tell which. On a sudden, she sat down by me, and hit me a smart slap on the shoulder.

‘David!’ she said, ‘I have found out something about myself which I never suspected before. If you want to see a cold-blooded wretch, look at me!’

It was so gravely said, and so perfectly absurd, that I burst out laughing. She was far too seriously perplexed about herself to take the smallest notice of my merriment.

‘Do you know,’ she resumed, ‘that I actually hesitate to write to Engelman?’

David ! I ought to be whipped at the cart's tail. I don't believe in Madame Fontaine.'

She little knew how that abrupt confession interested me. 'Tell me why !' I said eagerly.

'That's the disgraceful part of it,' she answered. 'I can't tell you why. Madame Fontaine spoke charmingly—with perfect taste and feeling. And all the time some devilish spirit of distrust kept whispering to me, "Don't believe her; she has her motive!" Are you sure, David, it is only a little illness that makes her shut herself up in her room, and look so frightfully pale and haggard? Do you know anything about her affairs? Engelman is rich ; Engelman has a position. Has she got into some difficulty since she refused him? and could he, by the barest

possibility, be of any use in helping her out of it?’

I declare solemnly that the idea suggested by my aunt never occurred to me until she asked those questions. As a rejected suitor, Mr. Engelman could be of no possible use to the widow. But suppose he was her accepted husband? and suppose the note fell due before Minna was married? In that case, Mr. Engelman might unquestionably be of use—he might lend the money.

My aunt’s sharp eyes were on me. ‘Out with it, David!’ she cried. ‘You don’t believe in her, either—and you know why.’

‘I know absolutely nothing,’ I rejoined; ‘I am guessing in the dark; and the event may prove that I am completely at fault. Don’t ask me to degrade Madame Fontaine’s

character in your estimation, without an atom of proof to justify what I say. I have something to propose which I think will meet the difficulty.'

With a strong exercise of self-restraint, my aunt resigned herself to listen. 'Let's hear your proposal,' she said. 'Have you any Scotch blood in your veins, David? You are wonderfully prudent and cautious for so young a man.'

I went straight on with what I had to say.

'Send the widow's message to Mr. Engelman, by all means,' I proceeded; 'but not by post. I was with him immediately after his offer of marriage had been refused; and it is my belief that he is far too deeply wounded by the manner in which Madame

Fontaine expressed herself when she rejected him, to be either 'able, or willing, to renew his proposal. I even doubt if he will believe in her expression of regret. This view of mine may turn out, of course, to be quite wrong; but let us at least put it to the test. I can easily get leave of absence for a few days. Let me take your letter to Bingen to-morrow, and see with my own eyes how it is received.'

At last I was fortunate enough to deserve my aunt's approval. 'An excellent suggestion,' she said. 'But—I believe I have caught the infection of your prudence, David—don't let us tell Madame Fontaine. Let her suppose that you have gone to Bingen in consequence of the unfavourable news of Engelman's health.' She paused, and con-

sidered a little. ‘Or, better still, Bingen is on the way to England. There will be nothing extraordinary in your stopping to visit Engelman, on your journey to London.’

This took me completely, and far from agreeably, by surprise. I said piteously, ‘Must I really leave Frankfort?’

‘My good fellow, I have other interests to consider besides Engelman’s interests,’ my aunt explained. ‘Mr. Hartrey is waiting to hear from me. There is no hope that Engelman will be able to travel to London, in his present state of health, and no possibility of Mr. Keller taking his place until something is settled at Frankfort. I want you to explain all this to Mr. Hartrey, and to help him in the management of the business.’

There is nobody else here, David, whom I can trust, as I trust you. I see no alternative but to ask you to go to London.'

On my side, I had no alternative but to submit—and, what is more (remembering all that I owed to my aunt), to submit with my best grace. We consulted Mr. Keller ; and he entirely agreed that I was the fittest person who could be found to reconcile Mr. Hartrey to the commercial responsibilities that burdened him. After a day's delay at Bingen, to study the condition of Mr. Engelman's health and to write the fullest report to Frankfort, the faster I could travel afterwards, and the sooner I could reach London, the better.

So hard necessity compelled me to leave the stage, before the curtain rose on the

final acts of the drama. The mail-post started at six in the morning. I packed up, and took leave of everybody, over-night—excepting Madame Fontaine, who still kept her room, and who was not well enough to see me. The dear kind-hearted Minna offered me her cheek to kiss, and made me promise to return for her marriage. She was strangely depressed at my departure. ‘You first consoled me,’ she said; ‘you have brought me happiness. I don’t like your leaving us. Oh, David, I do wish you were not going away!’ ‘Come! come!’ my aunt interposed; ‘no crying, young lady! Always keep a man’s spirits up when he leaves you. Give me a good hug, David—and think of the time when you will be a partner in the business.’ Ah! what a

woman she was ! Look as you may, my young friends, you will not find the like of her now.

Jack Straw was the one person up and stirring when the coach stopped the next morning at the door. I expected to be amused—but there was no reckoning with Jack. His farewell words literally frightened me.

‘ I say ! ’ he whispered, as I hurried into the hall, ‘ there’s one thing I want to ask you before you go.’

‘ Be quick about it, Jack.

‘ All right, David. I had a talk with Minna yesterday, about Mr. Keller’s illness. Is it true that he was cured out of the blue-glass bottle ? ’

‘ Perfectly true.’

‘Look here, David ! I have been thinking of it all night. *I* was cured out of the blue-glass bottle.’

I suddenly stood still, with my eyes riveted on his face. He stepped close up to me, and lowered his voice suddenly.

‘And *I* was poisoned,’ he said. ‘What I want to know is—Who poisoned Mr. Keller?’

BETWEEN THE PARTS.

MR. DAVID GLENNEY PRODUCES
HIS CORRESPONDENCE, AND THROWS SOME NEW
LIGHTS ON THE STORY.

I.

BE pleased to read the following letter from Mr. Lawyer's-Clerk-Schmuckle to Mr. Town-Councillor-Hof:

‘ My honoured Sir,—I beg to report that you may make your mind easy on the subject of Madame Fontaine. If she leaves Frankfort, she will not slip away privately as she did at Würzburg. Wherever she may go now, we need not apply again to her relations in this place to help us to find her. Henceforth I undertake to keep her in view until the promissory note falls due.

‘The lady is at present established as housekeeper in the employment of the firm of Wagner, Keller, and Engelman ; and there (barring accidents, which I shall carefully look after) she is likely to remain.

‘I have made a memorandum of the date at which her promissory note falls due—viz., the 31st December in the present year. The note being made payable at Würzburg, you must take care (in the event of its not being honoured) to have the document protested in that town, and to communicate with me by the same day’s post. I will myself see that the law takes its regular course.

‘Permit me most gratefully to thank you

for the advance on my regular fees which you have so graciously transmitted, and believe me your obedient humble servant to command.'

II.

I next submit a copy of a letter addressed by the late Chemistry-Professor Fontaine to an honoured friend and colleague. This gentleman is still living; and he makes it a condition of supplying the copy that his name shall not appear:—

‘Illustrious Friend and Colleague,—You will be surprised at so soon hearing from me again. The truth is, that I have some interesting news for you. An alarming accident has enabled me to test the value of one of my preparations on a living human subject—that subject being a man.

‘ My last letter informed you that I had resolved on making no further use of the Formula for recomposing some of the Borgia Poisons (erroneously supposed to be destroyed) left to me on the death of my lamented Hungarian friend—my master in chemical science.

‘ The motives which have led me to this decision are, I hope, beyond the reach of blame.

‘ You will remember agreeing with me, that the two specimens of these resuscitated poisons which I have succeeded in producing are capable—like the poisons already known to modern medical practice—of rendering the utmost benefit in certain cases of disease, if they are administered in carefully regulated doses. Should I live to devote

them to this good purpose, there will still be the danger (common to all poisonous preparations employed in medicine) of their doing fatal mischief, when misused by ignorance or crime.

‘ Bearing this in mind, I conceive it to be my duty to provide against dangerous results, by devoting myself to the discovery of efficient antidotes, before I adapt the preparations themselves to the capacities of the healing art. I have had some previous experience in this branch of what I call preservative chemistry, and I have already in some degree succeeded in attaining my object.

‘ The Formula in cypher which I now send to you, on the slip of paper inclosed, is an antidote to that one of the two poisons

known to you and to me by the fanciful name which you suggested for it—"Alexander's Wine."

‘ With regard to the second of the poisons, which (if you remember) I have entitled—in anticipation of its employment as medicine—"The Looking-Glass Drops," I regret to say that I have not yet succeeded in discovering the antidote in this case.

‘ Having now sufficiently explained my present position, I may tell you of the extraordinary accident to which I have alluded at the beginning of my letter.

‘ About a fortnight since, I was sent for, just as I had finished my lecture to the students, to see one of my servants. He had been suffering from illness for one or two days. I had of course offered him my

medical services. He refused, however, to trouble me ; sending word that he only wanted rest. Fortunately one of my assistants happened to see him, and at once felt the necessity of calling in my help:

‘ The man was a poor half-witted friendless creature, whom I had employed out of pure pity to keep my laboratory clean, and to wash and dry my bottles. He had sense enough to perform such small services as these, and no more. Judge of my horror when I went to his bedside, and instantly recognised the symptoms of poisoning by “ Alexander’s Wine ! ”

‘ I ran back to my laboratory, and unlocked the medicine-chest which held the antidote. In the next compartment, the poison itself was always placed. Looking

into the compartment now, I found it empty.

‘ I at once instituted a search, and discovered the bottle left out on a shelf. For the first time in my life, I had been guilty of inexcusable carelessness. I had not looked round me to see that I had left everything safe before quitting the room. The poor imbecile wretch had been attracted by the colour of “Alexander’s Wine,” and had tasted it (in his own phrase) “to see if it was nice.” My inquiries informed me that this had happened at least thirty-six hours since ! I had but one hope of saving him—derived from experiments on animals, which had shown me the very gradual progress of the deadly action of the poison.

‘ What I felt when I returned to the

suffering man, I shall not attempt to describe. You will understand how completely I was overwhelmed, when I tell you that I meanly concealed my own disgraceful thoughtlessness from my brethren in the University. I was afraid that my experiments might be prohibited as dangerous, and my want of common prudence be made the subject of public reprimand by the authorities. The medical professors were permitted by me to conclude that it was a case of illness entirely new in their experience.

‘In administering the antidote, I had no previous experiments to guide me, except my experiments with rabbits and dogs. Whether I miscalculated or whether I was deluded by my anxiety to save the man’s life, I cannot say. This at least is certain, I gave the

doses too copiously and at too short intervals.

‘The patient recovered—but it was after sustaining some incomprehensibly deteriorating change in the blood, which destroyed his complexion, and turned his hair grey. I have since modified the doses; and in dread of losing the memorandum, I have attached a piece of notched paper to the bottle, so as to render any future error of judgment impossible. At the same time, I have facilitated the future administration of the antidote by adding a label to the bottle, stating the exact quantity of the poison taken by my servant, as calculated by myself.

‘I ought, by the way, to have mentioned in the cypher that experience has shown me

the necessity, if the antidote is to be preserved for any length of time, of protecting it in blue glass from the influence of light.

‘Let me also tell you that I found a vegetable diet of use in perfecting the effect of the treatment. That mean dread of discovery, which I have already acknowledged, induced me to avail myself of my wife’s help in nursing the man. When he began to talk of what had happened to him, I could trust Madame Fontaine to keep the secret. When he was well enough to get up, the poor harmless creature disappeared. He was probably terrified at the prospect of entering the laboratory again. In any case, I have never seen him or heard of him since.

‘If you have had patience to read as far as

this, you will understand that I am not sure enough yet of my own discoveries to risk communicating them to any other person than yourself. Favour me with any chemical suggestions which may strike you—and then, in case of accidents, destroy the cypher. For the present farewell.'

Note to Doctor Fontaine's Letter.

'Alexander's Wine' refers to the infamous Roderic Borgia, historically celebrated as Pope Alexander the Sixth. He was accidentally, and most deservedly, killed by drinking one of the Borgia poisons, in a bowl of wine which he had prepared for another person.

The formula for 'The Looking-Glass Drops' is supposed to have been found hidden on removing the wooden lining at the back of a looking-glass, which had been used by Lucrezia Borgia. Hence the name.

III.

The third and last letter which I present is written by me, and was addressed to Mrs. Wagner during her stay at Frankfort:—

‘I exaggerate nothing, my dear aunt, when I say that I write in great distress. Let me beg you to prepare yourself for very sad news.

‘It was late yesterday evening before I arrived at Bingen. A servant was waiting to take my portinanteau, when I got out of the coach. After first asking my name, he communicated to me the melancholy tidings of dear Mr. Engelman’s death. He had sunk

under a fit of apoplexy, at an early hour that morning.

‘ Medical help was close at hand, and was (so far as I can hear) carefully and intelligently exercised. But he never rallied in the least. The fit appears to have killed him, as a bullet might have killed him.

‘ He had been very dull and heavy on the previous day. In the few words that he spoke before retiring to rest, my name was on his lips. He said, “ If I get better I should like to have David here, and to go on with him to our house of business in London.” He was very much flushed, and complained of feeling giddy ; but he would not allow the doctor to be sent for. His brother assisted him to ascend the stairs to his room, and asked him some questions about his affairs.

He replied impatiently, "Keller knows all about it—leave it to Keller."

'When I think of the good old man's benevolent and happy life, and when I remember that it was accidentally through me that he first met with Madame Fontaine, I feel a bitterness of spirit which makes my sense of the loss of him more painful than I can describe. I call to mind a hundred little instances of his kindness to me—and (don't be offended) I wish you had sent some other person than myself to represent you at Frankfort.

'He is to be buried here, in two days' time. I hope you will not consider me negligent of your interest in accepting his brother's invitation to follow him to the grave. I think it will put me in a better

frame of mind, if I can pay the last tribute of affection and respect to my old friend. When all is over, I will continue the journey to London, without stopping on the road night or day.

‘ Write to me at London, dear aunt ; and give my love to Minna and Fritz—and ask them to write to me also. I beg my best respects to Mr. Keller. Please assure him of my true sympathy ; I know, poor man, how deeply he will be grieved.’

PART II.

MR. DAVID GLENNEY COLLECTS HIS MATERIALS
AND CONTINUES THE STORY HISTORICALLY.

CHAPTER 1.

IN the preceding portion of this narrative I spoke as an eye-witness. In the present part of it, my absence from Frankfort leaves me dependent on the documentary evidence of other persons. This evidence consists (first) of letters addressed to myself; (secondly) of statements personally made to me; (thirdly) of extracts from a diary discovered after the lifetime of the writer. In all three cases the materials thus placed at my disposal bear proof of truthfulness on the face of them.

Early in the month of December, Mr. Keller sent a message to Madame Fontaine, requesting to see her on a matter of importance to both of them.

‘I hope you feel better to-day, madam,’ he said, rising to receive the widow when she entered the room.

‘You are very good, sir,’ she answered, in tones barely audible—with her eyes on the ground. ‘I can’t say that I feel much better.’

‘I have news for you, which ought to act as the best of all restoratives,’ Mr. Keller proceeded. ‘At last I have heard from my sister on the subject of the marriage.’

He stopped, and, suddenly stepping forward, caught the widow by the arm. At his last words she had started to her feet.

Her face suddenly turned from pale to red—and then changed again to a ghastly whiteness. She would have fallen if Mr. Keller had not held her up. He placed her at once in his own easy chair. ‘You must really have medical advice,’ he said gravely; ‘your nerves are seriously out of order. Can I get you anything?’

‘A glass of water, sir, if you will be so kind as to ring for it.’

‘There is no need to ring for it; I have water in the next room.’

She laid her hand on his arm, and stopped him as he was about to leave her.

‘One word first, sir. You will forgive a woman’s curiosity on such an interesting subject as the marriage of her child. Does

your sister propose a day for the wedding?’

‘My sister suggests,’ Mr. Keller answered, ‘the thirtieth of this month.’

He left her and opened the door of the next room.

As he disappeared, she rapidly followed out a series of calculations on her fingers. Her eyes brightened, her energies rallied. ‘No matter what happens so long as my girl is married first,’ she whispered to herself. ‘The wedding on the thirtieth, and the money due on the thirty-first. Saved by a day! Saved by a day!’

Mr. Keller returned with a glass of water. He started as he looked at her.

‘You seem to have recovered already—

you look quite a different woman!’ he exclaimed.

She drank the water nevertheless. ‘My unlucky nerves play me strange tricks, sir,’ she answered, as she set the empty glass down on a table at her side.

Mr. Keller took a chair and referred to his letter from Munich.

‘My sister hopes to be with us some days before the end of the year,’ he resumed. ‘But in her uncertain state of health, she suggests the thirtieth so as to leave a margin in case of unexpected delays. I presume this will afford plenty of time (I speak ignorantly of such things) for providing the bride’s outfit?’

Madame Fontaine smiled sadly. ‘Far

more time than we want, sir. My poor little purse will leave my girl to rely on her natural attractions—with small help from the jeweller and the milliner, on her wedding-day.'

Mr. Keller referred to his letter again, and looked up from it with a grim smile.

'My sister will in one respect at least anticipate the assistance of the jeweller,' he said. 'She proposes to bring with her, as a present to the bride, an heirloom on the female side of our family. It is a pearl necklace (of very great value. I am told) presented to my mother by the Empress Maria Theresa—in recognition of services rendered to that illustrious person early in life. As an expression of my sister's interest in the marriage, I thought an announcement of the

proposed gift might prove gratifying to you.'

Madame Fontaine clasped her hands, with a fervour of feeling which was in this case, at least, perfectly sincere. A pearl necklace, the gift of an Empress, would represent in money value a little fortune in itself. 'I can find no words to express my sense of gratitude,' she said; 'my daughter must speak for herself and for me.'

'And your daughter must hear the good news as soon as possible,' Mr. Keller added kindly. 'I won't detain you. I know you must be anxious to see Minna. One word before you go. You will, of course, invite any relatives and friends whom you would like to see at the wedding.'

Madame Fontaine lifted her sleepy eyes by slow gradations to the ceiling, and devoutly resigned herself to mention her family circumstances.

‘My parents cast me off, sir, when I married,’ she said; ‘my other relatives here and in Brussels refused to assist me when I stood in need of help. As for friends—you, dear Mr. Keller, are our only friend. Thank you again and again.’

She lowered her eyes softly to the floor, and glided out of the room. The back view of her figure was its best view. Even Mr. Keller—constitutionally inaccessible to exhibitions of female grace—followed her with his eyes, and perceived that his housekeeper was beautifully made.

On the stairs she met with the housemaid.

‘Where is Miss Minna?’ she asked impatiently. ‘In her room?’

‘In your room, madam. I saw Miss Minna go in as I passed the door.’

Madame Fontaine hurried up the next flight of stairs, and ran along the corridor as lightly as a young girl. The door of her room was ajar; she saw her daughter through the opening sitting on the sofa, with some work lying idle on her lap. Minna started up when her mother appeared.

‘Am I in the way, mamma? I am so stupid, I can’t get on with this embroidery——’

Madame Fontaine tossed the embroidery to the other end of the room, threw her

arms round Minna, and lifted her joyously from the floor as if she had been a little child.

‘The day is fixed, my angel!’ she cried;
‘You are to be married on the thirtieth!’

She shifted one hand to her daughter’s head, and clasped it with a fierce fondness to her bosom. ‘Oh, my darling, you had lovely hair even when you were a baby! We won’t have it dressed at your wedding. It shall flow down naturally in all its beauty—and no hand shall brush it but mine.’ She pressed her lips on Minna’s head, and devoured it with kisses; then, driven by some irresistible impulse, pushed the girl away from her, and threw herself on the sofa with a cry of pain.

‘Why did you start up, as if you were

afraid of me, when I came in?' she said wildly. 'Why did you ask if you were in the way? Oh, Minna! Minna! can't you forget the day when I locked you out of my room? My child! I was beside myself—I was mad with my troubles. Do you think I would behave harshly to you? Oh, my own love! when I came to tell you of your marriage, why did you ask me if you were in the way? My God! am I never to know a moment's pleasure again without something to embitter it? People say you take after your father, Minna. Are you as cold-blooded as he was? There! there! I don't mean it; I am a little hysterical, I think—don't notice me. Come and be a child again. Sit on my knee, and let us talk of your marriage.'

Minna put her arm round her mother's

neck a little nervously. ‘Dear, sweet mamma, how can you think me so hard-hearted and so ungrateful? I can’t tell you how I love you! Let this tell you.’

With a tender and charming grace, she kissed her mother—then drew back a little and looked at Madame Fontaine. The subsiding conflict of emotions still showed itself with a fiery brightness in the widow’s eyes. ‘Do you know what I am thinking?’ Minna asked, a little timidly.

‘What is it, my dear?’

‘I think you are almost too fond of me, mamma. I shouldn’t like to be the person who stood between me and my marriage—if *you* knew of it.’

Madame Fontaine smiled. ‘You foolish child, do you take me for a tigress?’ she

said playfully. 'I must have another kiss to reconcile me to my new character.'

She bent her head to meet the caress—looked by chance at a cupboard fixed in a recess in the opposite wall of the room—and suddenly checked herself. 'This is too selfish of me,' she said, rising abruptly. 'All this time I am forgetting the bridegroom. His father will leave him to hear the good news from you. Do you think I don't know what you are longing to do?' She led Minna hurriedly to the door. 'Go, my dear one—go and tell Fritz!'

The instant her daughter disappeared, she rushed across the room to the cupboard. Her eyes had not deceived her. The key *was* left in the lock.

CHAPTER II.

MADAME FONTAINE dropped into a chair, overwhelmed by the discovery.

She looked at the key left in the cupboard. It was of an old-fashioned pattern—but evidently also of the best workmanship of the time. On its flat handle it bore engraved the words, ‘Pink-Room Cupboard’—so called from the colour of the curtains and hangings in the bedchamber.

‘Is my brain softening?’ she said to herself. ‘What a horrible mistake! What a frightful risk to have run!’

She got on her feet again, and opened the cupboard.

The two lower shelves were occupied by her linen, neatly folded and laid out. On the higher shelf, nearly on a level with her eyes, stood a plain wooden box about two feet in height by one foot in breadth. She examined the position of this box with breathless interest and care—then gently lifted it in both hands and placed it on the floor. On a table near the window lay a half-finished water-colour drawing, with a magnifying glass by the side of it. Providing herself with the glass, she returned to the cupboard, and closely investigated the place on which the box had stood. The slight layer of dust—so slight as to be imperceptible to the unassisted eye—which had

surrounded the four sides of the box, presented its four delicate edges in perfectly undisturbed straightness of line. This mute evidence conclusively proved that the box had not been moved during her quarter of an hour's absence in Mr. Keller's room. She put it back again, and heaved a deep breath of relief.

But it was a bad sign (she thought) that her sense of caution had been completely suspended, in the eagerness of her curiosity to know if Mr. Keller's message of invitation referred to the wedding-day. 'I lose my best treasure,' she said to herself sadly, 'if I am beginning to lose my steadiness of mind. If this should happen again——'

She left the expression of the idea uncompleted ; locked the door of the room ;

and returned to the place on which she had left the box.

Seating herself, she rested the box on her knee and opened it.

Certain tell-tale indentations, visible where the cover fitted into the lock, showed that it had once been forced open. The lock had been hampered on some former occasion ; and the key remained so fast fixed in it that it could neither be turned nor drawn out. In her newly-aroused distrust of her own prudence, she was now considering the serious question of emptying the box, and sending it to be fitted with a lock and key.

‘Have I anything by me,’ she thought to herself, ‘in which I can keep the bottles?’

She emptied the box, and placed round

her on the floor those terrible six bottles which had been the special subjects of her husband's precautionary instructions on his death-bed. Some of them were smaller than others, and were manufactured in glass of different colours—the six compartments in the medicine-chest being carefully graduated in size, so as to hold them all steadily. The labels on three of the bottles were unintelligible to Madame Fontaine; the inscriptions were written in barbarously-abridged Latin characters.

The bottle which was the fourth in order, as she took them out one by one, was wrapped in a sheet of thick cartridge-paper, covered on its inner side with characters written in mysterious cypher. But the label pasted on the bottle contained an

inscription in good readable German, thus translated :

‘The Looking-Glass Drops. Fatal dose, as discovered by experiment on animals, the same as in the case of “Alexander’s Wine.” But the effect, in producing death, more rapid, and more indistinguishable, in respect of presenting traces on post-mortem examination.’

The lines thus written were partially erased by strokes of the pen—drawn through them at a later date, judging by the colour of the ink. In the last blank space left at the foot of the label, these words were added—also in ink of a fresher colour :

‘After many patient trials, I can discover no trustworthy antidote to this infernal poison. Under these circumstances, I dare

not attempt to modify it for medical use. I would throw it away—but I don't like to be beaten. If I live a little longer I will try once more, with my mind refreshed by other studies.'

Madame Fontaine paused before she wrapped the bottle up again in its covering, and looked with longing eyes at the cyphers which filled the inner side of the sheet of paper. There, perhaps, was the announcement of the discovery of the antidote; or possibly, the record of some more recent experiment which placed the terrible power of the poison in a new light! And there also was the cypher defying her to discover its secret!

The fifth bottle that she took from the chest contained 'Alexander's Wine.' The

sixth, and last, was of the well-remembered blue glass, which had played such an important part in the event of Mr. Keller's recovery.

David Glenney had rightly conjectured that the label had been removed from the blue-glass bottle. Madame Fontaine shook it out of the empty compartment. The inscription (also in the German language) ran as follows :—

‘Antidote to Alexander's Wine. The fatal dose, in case of accident, is indicated by the notched slip of paper attached to the bottle. Two fluid drachms of the poison (more than enough to produce death) were accidentally taken in my experience. So gradual is the deadly effect that, after a delay of thirty-six hours before my attention was

called to the case, the administration of the antidote proved successful. The doses are to be repeated every three or four hours. Any person watching the patient may know that the recovery is certain, and that the doses are therefore to be discontinued, by these signs: the cessation of the trembling in the hands; the appearance of natural perspiration; and the transition from the stillness of apathy to the repose of sleep. For at least a week or ten days afterwards a vegetable diet, with cream, is necessary as a means of completing the cure.'

She laid the label aside, and looked at the two bottles—the poison and the antidote—ranged together at her feet.

'Power!' she thought, with a superb smile of triumph. 'The power that I have

dreamed of all my life is mine at last ! Alone among mortal creatures, I have Life and Death for my servants. You were deaf, Mr. Keller, to my reasons, and deaf to my entreaties. What wonderful influence brought you to my feet, and made you the eager benefactor of my child ? My servant Death, who threatened you in the night ; and my servant Life, who raised you up in the morning. What a position ! I stand here, a dweller in a populous city—and every creature in it, from highest to lowest, is a creature in my power !’

She looked through the window of her room over the houses of Frankfort. At last her sleepy eyes opened wide ; an infernal beauty irradiated her face. For one moment, she stood—a demon in human form. The

next, she suddenly changed into a timid woman, shaken in every limb by the cold grasp of fear.

What influence had wrought the transformation ?

Nothing but a knock at the door.

‘Who’s there?’ she cried.

The voice that answered her was the voice of Jack Straw.

‘Hullo, there, Mrs. Fontaine ! Let me in.’

She placed a strong constraint on herself ; she spoke in friendly tones. ‘What do you want, Jack?’

‘I want to show you my keys.’

‘What do I care about the crazy wretch’s keys?’—was the thought that passed through Madame Fontaine’s mind, when Jack an-

swered her from the outer side of the door. But she was still careful, when she spoke to him, to disguise her voice in its friendliest tones.

‘Excuse me for keeping you waiting, Jack. I can’t let you in yet.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I am dressing. Come back in half an hour; and I shall be glad to see you.’

There was no reply to this. Jack’s step was so light that it was impossible to hear, through the door, whether he had gone away or not. After waiting a minute, the widow ventured on peeping out. Jack had taken himself off. Not a sign of him was to be seen, when she bent over the railing of the corridor, and looked down on the stairs.

She locked herself in again. ‘I hope I haven’t offended him!’ she thought, as she returned to the empty medicine-chest.

The fear that Jack might talk of what had happened to him in the laboratory at Würzburg, and that he might allude to his illness in terms which could not fail to recall the symptoms of Mr. Keller’s illness, was constantly present to her mind. She decided on agreeably surprising him by a little present, which might help her to win his confidence and to acquire some influence over him. As a madman lately released from Bedlam, it might perhaps not greatly matter what he said. But suspicion was easily excited. Though David Glenney had been sent out of the way, his aunt remained at Frankfort; and an insolent readiness in

distrusting German ladies seemed to run in the family.

Having arrived at these conclusions, she gave her mind again to the still unsettled question of the new lock to the medicine-chest.

Measuring the longest of the bottles (the bottle containing the antidote), she found that her dressing-case was not high enough to hold it, while the chest was in the locksmith's workshop. Her trunks, on the other hand, were only protected by very ordinary locks, and were too large to be removed to the safe keeping of the cupboard. She must either leave the six bottles loose on the shelf or abandon the extra security of the new lock.

The one risk of taking the first of these

two courses, was the risk of leaving the key again in the cupboard. Was this likely to occur, after the fright she had already suffered? The question was not really worth answering. She had already placed two of the bottles on the shelf—when a fatal objection to trusting the empty box out of her own possession suddenly crossed her mind.

Her husband's colleagues at Würzburg and some of the elder students, were all acquainted (externally, at least) with the appearance of the Professor's ugly old medicine-chest. It could be easily identified by the initials of his name, inscribed in deeply-burnt letters on the lid. Suppose one of these men happened to be in Frankfurt? and suppose he saw the stolen chest

in the locksmith's shop? Two such coincidences were in the last degree improbable—but it was enough that they were possible. Who but a fool, in her critical position, would run the risk of even one chance in a hundred turning against her? Instead of trusting the chest in a stranger's hands, the wiser course would be to burn it at the first safe opportunity, and be content with the security of the cupboard, while she remained in Mr. Keller's house. Arriving at this conclusion, she put the chest and its contents back again on the shelf—with the one exception of the label detached from the blue-glass bottle.

In the preternatural distrust that now possessed her, this label assumed the character of a dangerous witness, if, through

some unlucky accident, it happened to fall into the hands of any person in the house. She picked it up—advanced to the fireplace to destroy it—paused—and looked at it again.

Nearly two doses of the antidote were still left. Who could say, looking at the future of such a life as hers, that she might not have some need of it yet—after it had already served her so well? Could she be sure, if she destroyed it, of remembering the instructions which specified the intervals at which the doses were to be given, the signs which signified recovery, and the length of time during which the vegetable diet was to be administered?

She read the first sentences again carefully.

‘Antidote to Alexander’s Wine. The fatal dose, in case of accident, is indicated by the notched slip of paper attached to the bottle. Two fluid drachms of the poison (more than enough to produce death) were accidentally taken in my experience. So gradual is the deadly effect that, after a delay of thirty-six hours before my attention was called to the case, the administration of the antidote proved successful. The doses are to be repeated——’

The remaining instructions, beginning with this last sentence, were not of a nature to excite suspicion. Taken by themselves, they might refer to nothing more remarkable than a remedy in certain cases of illness. First she thought of cutting off the upper part of the label : but the lines of the writing were

so close together, that they would infallibly betray the act of mutilation. She opened her dressing-case and took from it a common-looking little paper-box, purchased at the chemist's, bearing the ambitious printed title of 'Macula Exstinctor, or Destroyer of Stains'—being an ordinary preparation, in powder, for removing stains from dresses, ink-stains included. The printed directions stated that the powder, partially dissolved in water, might also be used to erase written characters without in any way injuring the paper, otherwise than by leaving a slight shine on the surface. By these means, Madame Fontaine removed the first four sentences on the label, and left the writing on it to begin harmlessly with the instructions for repeating the doses.

‘Now I can trust you to refresh my memory without telling tales,’ she said to herself, when she put the label back in the chest. As for the recorded dose of the poison, she was not likely to forget that. It was her medicine-measuring glass, filled up to the mark of two drachms. Having locked the cupboard, and secured the key in her pocket, she was ready for the reception of Jack. Her watch told her that the half hour’s interval had more than expired. She opened the door of her room. There was no sign of him outside. She looked over the stairs, and called to him softly. There was no reply; the little man’s sensitive dignity had evidently taken offence.

The one thing to be done (remembering all that she had to dread from the wanton

exercise of Jack's tongue) was to soothe his ruffled vanity without further delay. There would be no difficulty in discovering him, if he had not gone out. Wherever his Mistress might be at the moment, there he was sure to be found.

Trying Mrs. Wagner's room first, without success, the widow descended to the ground-floor and made her way to the offices. In the private room, formerly occupied by Mr. Engelman, David Glenney's aunt was working at her desk ; and Jack Straw was perched on the old-fashioned window-seat, putting the finishing-touches to Minna's new straw hat.

CHAPTER III.

IN the gloom thrown over the household by Mr. Engelman's death, Mrs. Wagner, with characteristic energy and good sense, had kept her mind closely occupied. During the office hours, she studied those details of the business at Frankfort which differed from the details of the business in London; and soon mastered them sufficiently to be able to fill the vacancy which Mr. Engelman had left. The position that he had held became, with all its privileges and responsibilities, Mrs. Wagner's position—claimed, not in virtue of her rank as directress of the London house,

but in recognition of the knowledge that she had specially acquired to fit her for the post.

Out of office-hours, she corresponded with the English writer on the treatment of insane persons, whose work she had discovered in her late husband's library, and assisted him in attracting public attention to the humane system which he advocated. Even the plan for the employment of respectable girls, in suitable departments of the office, was not left neglected by this indefatigable woman. The same friendly consideration which had induced her to spare Mr. Keller any allusion to the subject, while his health was not yet completely restored, still kept her silent until time had reconciled him to the calamity of his partner's death. Privately, however, she had caused inquiries

to be made in Frankfort, which would assist her in choosing worthy candidates for employment, when the favourable time came—probably after the celebration of Fritz's marriage—for acting in the interests of the proposed reform.

‘Pray send me away, if I interrupt you,’ said Madame Fontaine, pausing modestly on the threshold before she entered the room. She spoke English admirably, and made a point of ignoring Mrs. Wagner's equally perfect knowledge of German, by addressing her always in the English language.

‘Come in by all means,’ Mrs. Wagner answered. ‘I am only writing to David Glenney, to tell him (at Minna's request) that the wedding-day is fixed.’

‘Give your nephew my kind regards,

Mrs. Wagner. He will be one of the party at the wedding, of course ? ’

‘ Yes—if he can be spared from his duties in London. Is there anything I can do for you, Madame Fontaine ? ’

‘ Nothing, thank you—except to excuse my intrusion. I am afraid I have offended our little friend there, with the pretty straw hat in his hand, and I want to make my peace with him.’

Jack looked up from his work with an air of lofty disdain. ‘ Oh, dear me, it doesn’t matter,’ he said, in his most magnificent manner.

‘ I was dressing when he knocked at my door,’ pursued Madame Fontaine ; ‘ and I asked him to come back, and show me his keys in half an hour. Why didn’t you

return, Jack? Won't you show me the keys now?'

'You see it's a matter of business,' Jack replied as loftily as ever. 'I am in the business—Keeper of the Keys. Mistress is in the business; Mr. Keller is in the business. *You* are not in the business. It doesn't matter. Upon my soul, it doesn't matter.'

Mrs. Wagner held up her forefinger reprovingly. 'Jack! don't forget you are speaking to a lady.'

Jack audaciously put his hand to his head, as if this was an effort of memory which was a little too much to expect of him.

'Anything to please you, Mistress, he said. 'I'll show her the bag.'

He exhibited to Madame Fontaine a leather bag, with a strap fastened round it.

‘The keys are inside,’ he explained. ‘I wore them loose this morning: and they made a fine jingle. Quite musical to *my* ear. But Mistress thought the noise likely to be a nuisance in the long run. So I strapped them up in a bag to keep them quiet. And when I move about, the bag hangs from my shoulder, like this, by another strap. When the keys are wanted, I open the bag. You don’t want them—you’re not in the business. Besides, I’m thinking of going out, and showing myself and my bag in the fashionable quarter of the town. On such an occasion, I think I ought to present the appearance of a gentleman—I ought to wear gloves. Oh, it doesn’t matter! I needn’t detain you any longer. Good morning.’

He made one of his fantastic bows, and waved his hand, dismissing Madame Fontaine from further attendance on him. Secretly, he was as eager as ever to show the keys. But the inordinate vanity which was still the mad side of him and the incurable side of him, shrank from opening the leather bag unless the widow first made a special request and a special favour of it. Feeling no sort of interest in the subject, she took the shorter way of making her peace with him. She took out her purse.

‘Let me make you a present of the gloves,’ she said, with her irresistible smile.

Jack lost all his dignity in an instant.

He leapt off the window seat and snatched at the money, like a famished animal snatching at a piece of meat. Mrs. Wagner caught

him by the arm, and looked at him. He lifted his eyes to hers, then lowered them again as if he was ashamed of himself.

‘Oh, to be sure!’ he said, ‘I have forgotten my manners, I haven’t said Thank you. A lapse of memory, I suppose. Thank you, Mrs. Housekeeper.’ In a moment more, he and his bag were on their way to the fashionable quarter of the town.

‘You will make allowances for my poor little Jack, I am sure,’ said Mrs. Wagner.

‘My dear madam, Jack amuses me!’

Mrs. Wagner winced a little at the tone of the widow’s reply. ‘I have cured him of all the worst results of his cruel imprisonment in the mad-house,’ she went on. ‘But his harmless vanity seem to be inbred; I can do nothing with him on that side of

his character. He is proud of being trusted with anything, especially with keys; and he has been kept waiting for them, while I had far more important matters to occupy me. In a day or two he will be more accustomed to his great responsibility, as he calls it.'

'Of course you don't trust him,' said Madame Fontaine, 'with keys that are of any importance; like the key of your desk there, for instance.'

Mrs. Wagner's steady grey eyes began to brighten. 'I can trust him with anything,' she answered emphatically.

Madame Fontaine arched her handsome brows in a mutely polite expression of extreme surprise.

'In my experience of the world,' Mrs. Wagner went on, 'I have found that the

rarest of all human virtues is the virtue of gratitude. In a hundred little ways my poor friendless Jack has shown me that *he* is grateful. To my mind that is reason enough for trusting him.'

'With money?' the widow inquired.

'Certainly. In London I trusted him with money—with the happiest results. I quieted his mind by an appeal to his sense of trust and self-respect, which he thoroughly appreciated. As yet I have not given him the key of my desk here, because I reserve it as a special reward for good conduct. In a few days more I have no doubt he will add it to the collection in his bag.'

'Ah,' said Madame Fontaine, with the humility which no living woman knew better when and how to assume, 'you understand

these difficult questions—you have your grand national common-sense. I am only a poor limited German woman. But, as you say in England, “Live and learn.” You have indescribably interested me. Good morning.’

She left the room. ‘Hateful woman!’ she said in her own language, on the outer side of the door.

‘Humbug!’ said Mrs. Wagner in *her* language, on the inner side of the door.

If there had been more sympathy between the two ladies, or if Madame Fontaine had felt a little curiosity on the subject of crazy Jack’s keys, she might have taken away with her some valuable materials for future consideration. As it was, Mrs. Wagner had not troubled her with any detailed narrative of

the manner in which she had contrived to fill Jack's leather bag.

In London, she had begun cautiously by only giving him some of the useless old keys which accumulate about a house in course of years. When the novelty of merely keeping them had worn off, and when he wanted to see them put to some positive use, she had added one or two keys of her own, and had flattered his pride by asking him to open the box or the desk for her, as the case might be. Proceeding on the same wisely gradual plan at Frankfort, she had asked Mr. Keller to help her, and had been taken by him (while Jack was out of the way) to a lumber-room in the basement of the house, on the floor of which several old keys were lying about. 'Take as many as you like,' he had

said ; ‘ they have been here, for all I know, ever since the house was repaired and refurnished in my grandfather’s time, and they might be sold for old iron, if there were only enough of them.’ Mrs. Wagner had picked up the first six keys that presented themselves, and had made Jack Straw the happiest of men. He found no fault with them for being rusty. On the contrary, he looked forward with delight to the enjoyment of cleaning away the rust. ‘ They shall be as bright as diamonds,’ he had said to his mistress, ‘ before I have done with them.’

And what did Madame Fontaine lose, by failing to inform herself of such trifles as these ? She never discovered what she had lost. But she had not done with Jack Straw yet.

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER leaving Mrs. Wagner, the widow considered with herself, and then turned away from the commercial regions of the house, in search of her daughter.

She opened the dining-room door, and found the bagatelle-board on the table. Fritz and Minna were playing a game of the desultory sort—with the inevitable interruptions appropriate to courtship.

‘Are you coming to join us, mamma? Fritz is playing very badly.’

‘This sort of thing requires mathematical calculation,’ Fritz remarked; ‘and Minna distracts my attention.’

Madame Fontaine listened with a smile of maternal indulgence. ‘I am on my way back to my room,’ she said. ‘If either of you happen to see Jack Straw——’

‘He has gone out,’ Fritz interposed. ‘I saw him through the window. He started at a run—and then remembered his dignity, and slackened his pace to a walk. How will he come back, I wonder?’

‘He will come back with greater dignity than ever, Fritz. I have given him the money to buy himself a pair of gloves. If you or Minna happen to meet with him before I do, tell him he may come upstairs and show me his new gloves. I

like to indulge the poor imbecile creature. You mustn't laugh at him—he is to be pitied.'

Expressing these humane sentiments, she left the lovers to their game. While Jack was still pleasurably excited by the new gift, he would be in the right frame of mind to feel her influence. Now or never (if the thing could be done) was the time to provide against the danger of chance-allusions to what had happened at Würzburg. It was well known in the house that Mrs. Wagner wished to return to London, as soon after the marriage as certain important considerations connected with the management of the office would permit. By Madame Fontaine's calculations, Jack would be happily out of the way of doing mischief (if she could keep

him quiet in the meanwhile) in a month or six weeks' time.

The game went on in the dining-room—with the inevitable intervals. Beyond reproach as a lover, Fritz showed no signs of improvement as a bagatelle-player. In a longer pause than usual, during which the persons concerned happened to have their backs turned to the door, a disagreeable interruption occurred. At a moment of absolute silence an intruding voice made itself heard, inviting immediate attention in these words:—

‘I say, you two! If you want to see the finest pair of gloves in Frankfort, just look here.’

There he stood with outstretched hands, exhibiting a pair of bright green gloves, and

standing higher in his own estimation than ever.

‘Why do you always come in without knocking?’ Fritz asked, with excusable indignation.

‘Why have *you* always got your arm round her waist?’ Jack retorted. ‘I say, Miss Minna! (I only offer a remark), the more he kisses you the more you seem to like it.’

‘Send him away, for Heaven’s sake!’ Minna whispered.

‘Go upstairs!’ cried Fritz.

‘What! do you want to be at it again?’ asked Jack.

‘Go and show your new gloves to Madame Fontaine,’ said Minna.

The girl’s quick wit had discovered the

right way to get rid of Jack. He accepted the suggestion with enthusiasm. ‘Ah!’ he exclaimed, ‘that’s a good idea! It would never have entered *your* head, Fritz, would it?’

Before Fritz could reply, Jack was out of his reach.

The widow sat in her room, innocently reading the newspaper. A cake happened to be on the table at her side; and a bottle of sparkling lemonade, by the merest coincidence, was in the near neighbourhood of the cake. Jack’s eyes brightened, as they turned towards the table when he entered the room.

‘And those are the gloves!’ said Madame Fontaine, with her head held critically a little on one side, as if she was a con-

noisseur enjoying a fine picture. ‘How very pretty! And what good taste you have!’

Jack (with his eyes still on the cake) accepted these flattering expressions as no more than his due. ‘I am pleased with my walk,’ he remarked. ‘I have made a successful appearance in public. When the general attention was not occupied with my bag of keys, it was absorbed in my gloves. I showed a becoming modesty—I took no notice of anybody.’

‘Perhaps your walk has given you a little appetite?’ the widow suggested.

‘What did you say?’ cried Jack. ‘Appetite! Upon my soul, I could eat—— No, that’s not gentleman-like. Mistress gave me one of her looks when I said

“Upon my soul” down in the office. Thank you. Yes ; I like cake. Excuse me —I hope it has got plums in it ? ’

‘Plums and other fine things besides. Taste!’

Jack tried hard to preserve his good manners, and only taste as he was told. But the laws of Nature were too much for him. He was as fond of sweet things as a child—he gobbled. ‘I say, you’re uncommonly good to me all of a sudden,’ he exclaimed between the bites. ‘You didn’t make much of me like this at Würzburg!’

He had given Madame Fontaine her opportunity. She was not the woman to let it slip. ‘Oh, Jack!’ she said, in tones of gentle reproach, ‘didn’t I nurse you at Würzburg?’

‘Well,’ Jack admitted, ‘you did something of the sort.’

‘What do you mean?’

He had finished his first slice of cake ; his politeness began to show signs of wearing out.

‘You did what my master the Doctor told you to do,’ he said. ‘But I don’t believe you cared whether I lived or died. When you had to tuck me up in bed, for instance, you did it with the grossest indifference. Ha ! you have improved since that time. Give me some more cake. Never mind cutting it thick. Is that bottle of lemonade for me?’

‘You hardly deserve it, Jack, after the way you have spoken of me. Don’t you remember,’ she added, cautiously leading

him back to the point, 'I used to make your lemonade when you were ill?'

Jack persisted in wandering away from the point. 'You are so hungry for compliments,' he objected. 'Haven't I told you that you have improved? Only go on as you are going on now, and I dare say I shall put you next to Mistress in my estimation, one of these days. Let the cork go out with a pop; I like noises of all kinds. Your good health! Is it manners to smack one's lips after lemonade?—it *is* such good stuff, and there's *such* pleasure in feeling it sting one's throat as it goes down. You didn't give me such lemonade as this, when I was ill—Oh! that reminds me.'

· Reminds you of something that hap-

pened at Würzburg?' Madame Fontaine inquired.

'Yes. Wait a bit. I'm going to try how the cake tastes dipped in lemonade. Ha! ha! how it fizzes as I stir it round! Yes; something that happened at Würzburg, as you say. I asked David about it, the morning he went away. But the coach was waiting for him; and he ran off without saying a word. I call that rude.'

He was still stirring his lemonade with his bit of cake—or he might have seen something in the widow's face that would have startled him. He did look up, when she spoke to him. His sense of hearing was his quickest sense; and he was struck by the sudden change in her voice.

‘What did you ask David?’—was all she ventured to say.

Jack still looked at her. ‘Anything the matter with you?’ he inquired.

‘Nothing. What did you ask David?’

‘Something I wanted to know.’

‘Perhaps *I* can tell you what you want to know?’

‘I shouldn’t wonder. No: dipping the cake in lemonade doesn’t improve it, and it leaves crumbs in the drink.’

‘Throw away that bit of cake, Jack, and have some more.’

‘May I help myself?’

‘Certainly. But you haven’t told me yet what you want to know.’

At last he answered directly. ‘What I

want to know is this,' he said. ' Who poisoned Mr. Keller ? '

He was cutting the cake as he spoke, and extracted a piece of candied orange-peel with the point of the knife. Once more, the widow's face had escaped observation. She turned away quickly, and occupied herself in mending the fire. In this position, her back was turned towards the table—she could trust herself to speak.

' You are talking nonsense ! ' she said.

Jack stopped—with the cake half-way to his mouth. Here was a direct attack on his dignity, and he was not disposed to put up with it. ' I never talk nonsense,' he answered sharply.

' You do,' Madame Fontaine rejoined, just as sharply on her side. ' Mr. Keller fell

ill, as anyone else might fall ill. Nobody poisoned him.'

Jack got on his legs. For the moment he actually forgot the cake. 'Nobody?' he repeated. 'Tell me this, if you please: Wasn't Mr. Keller cured out of the blue-glass bottle—like me?'

(Who had told him this? Joseph might have told him; Minna might have told him. It was no time for inquiry; the one thing needful was to eradicate the idea from his mind. She answered boldly, 'Quite right, so far'—and waited to see what came of it.)

'Very well,' said Jack, 'Mr. Keller was cured out of the blue-glass bottle, like me. And *I* was poisoned. Now?'

She flatly contradicted him again. 'You were *not* poisoned!'

Jack crossed the room, with a flash of the old Bedlam light in his eyes, and confronted her at the fireplace. ‘The devil is the father of lies,’ he said, lifting his hand solemnly. ‘No lies! I heard my master the Doctor say I was poisoned.’

She was ready with her answer. ‘Your master the Doctor said that to frighten you. He didn’t want you to taste his medicines in his absence again. You drank double what any person ought to have drunk, you greedy Jack, when you tasted that pretty violet-coloured medicine in your master’s workshop. And you had yourself to thank—not poison, when you fell ill.’

Jack looked hard at her. He could reason so far as that he and Mr. Keller must have taken the same poison, because he and

Mr. Keller had been cured out of the same bottle. But to premise that he had been made ill by an overdose of medicine, and that Mr. Keller had been made ill in some other way, and then to ask, how two different illnesses could both have been cured by the same remedy—was an effort utterly beyond him. He hung his head sadly, and went back to the table.

‘I wish I hadn’t asked you about it,’ he said. ‘You puzzle me horribly.’ But for that unendurable sense of perplexity, he would still have doubted and distrusted her as resolutely as ever. As it was, his bewildered mind unconsciously took its refuge in belief. ‘If it was medicine,’ asked the poor creature vacantly, ‘what is the medicine good for?’

At those words, an idea of the devil’s

own prompting entered Madame Fontaine's mind. Still standing at the fireplace, she turned her head slowly, and looked at the cupboard.

‘It's a better remedy even than the blue-glass bottle,’ she said ; ‘it cures you so soon when you are tired, or troubled in your mind, that I have brought it away with me from Würzburg, to use it for myself.’

Jack's face brightened with a new interest. ‘Oh,’ he said eagerly, ‘do let me see it again !’

She put her hand in her pocket, took out the key, and hesitated at the last moment.

‘Just one look at it,’ Jack pleaded, ‘to see if it's the same.’

She unlocked the cupboard.

CHAPTER V.

JACK attempted to follow her, and look in. She waved him back with her hand.

‘Wait at the window,’ she said, ‘where you can see the medicine in the light.’ She took the bottle of ‘Alexander’s Wine’ from the chest, and having locked the cupboard again, replaced the key in her pocket. ‘Do you remember it?’ she asked, showing him the bottle.

He shuddered as he recognised the colour. ‘Medicine?’ he said to himself—troubled anew by doubts which he was

not able to realise. ‘I don’t remember how much I took when I tasted it. Do you?’

‘I have told you already. You took twice the proper dose.’

‘Did my master the Doctor say that?’

‘Yes.’

‘And did he tell you what the proper dose was?’

‘Yes.’

Jack was not able to resist this. ‘I should like to see it!’ he said eagerly. ‘My master was a wonderful man—my master knew everything.’

Madame Fontaine looked at him. He waited to see his request granted, like a child waiting to see a promised toy. ‘Shall I measure it out, and show you?’ she said.

‘I suppose you don’t know what two drachms mean?’

‘No, no! Let me see it.’

She looked at him again and hesitated. With a certain reluctance of manner, she opened her dressing-case. As she took out a medicine-measuring-glass, her hand began to tremble. A faint perspiration showed itself on her forehead. She put the glass on the table, and spoke to Jack.

‘What makes you so curious to see what the dose is?’ she said. ‘Do you think you are likely to want some of it yourself?’

His eyes looked longingly at the poison. ‘It cures you when you are tired or troubled in your mind,’ he answered, repeating her own words. ‘I am but a little fellow—and

I'm more easily tired sometimes than you would think.'

She passed her handkerchief over her forehead. 'The fire makes the room rather warm,' she said.

Jack took no notice of the remark; he had not done yet with the confession of his little infirmities. He went on proving his claim to be favoured with some of the wonderful remedy.

'And as for being troubled in my mind,' he said, 'you haven't a notion how bad I am sometimes. If I'm kept away from Mistress for a whole day—when I say or do something wrong, you know—I tell you this, I'm fit to hang myself! If you were to see me, I do think your heart would be touched; I do indeed!'

Instead of answering him, she rose abruptly, and hurried to the door.

‘Surely there’s somebody outside,’ she exclaimed—‘somebody wanting to speak to me!’

‘I don’t hear it,’ said Jack; ‘and mine are the quickest ears in the house.’

‘Wait a minute, and let me see.’

She opened the door: closed it again behind her; and hurried along the lonely corridor. Throwing up the window at the end, she put her head out into the keen wintry air, with a wild sense of relief. She was almost beside herself, without knowing why. Poor Jack’s innocent attempts to persuade her to his destruction had, in their pitiable simplicity, laid a hold on that complex and terrible nature which shook it to its

centre. The woman stood face to face with her own contemplated crime, and trembled at the diabolical treachery of it. ‘What’s the matter with me?’ she wondered inwardly. ‘I feel as if I could destroy every poison in the chest with my own hands.’

Slowly she returned along the corridor, to her room. The refreshing air had strung up her nerves again! she began to recover herself. The strengthened body re-acted on the wavering mind. She smiled as she recalled her own weakness, looking at the bottle of poison which she had mechanically kept in her hand. ‘That feeble little creature might do some serious mischief, between this and the wedding-day,’ she thought; ‘and yet——and yet——’

‘ Well, was there anybody outside ? ’ Jack asked.

‘ Nothing to matter,’ she said. The answer was spoken mechanically. Something in him or something in herself, it was impossible to say which, had suddenly set her thinking of the day when her husband had dragged him out of the jaws of death. It seemed strange that the memory of the dead Doctor should come between them in that way, and at that time.

Jack recalled her to the passing moment. He offered her the medicine measuring-glass left on the table. ‘ It frightens me, when I think of what I did,’ he said. ‘ And yet it’s such a pretty colour—I want to see it again.’

In silence, she took the glass ; in silence,

she measured out the fatal two drachms of the poison, and showed it to him.

‘Do put it in something,’ he pleaded, ‘and let me have it to keep : I know I shall want it.’

Still in silence, she turned to the table, and searching again in her dressing-case, found a little empty bottle. She filled it and carefully fitted in the glass stopper. Jack held out his hand. She suddenly drew her own hand back. ‘No,’ she said. ‘On second thoughts, I won’t let you have it.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you can’t govern your tongue, and can’t keep anything to yourself. You will tell everybody in the house that I have given you my wonderful medicine. They

will all be wanting some—and I shall have none left for myself.’

‘Isn’t that rather selfish?’ said Jack. ‘I suppose it’s natural, though. Never mind, I’ll do anything to please you; I’ll keep it in my pocket and not say a word to anybody. Now?’

Once more, he held out his hand. Once more Madame Fontaine checked herself in the act of yielding to him. Her dead husband had got between them again. The wild words he had spoken to her, in the first horror of the discovery that his poor imbecile servant had found and tasted the fatal drug, came back to her memory—‘If he dies I shall not survive him. And I firmly believe I shall not rest in my grave.’ She had never been, like her husband, a

believer in ghosts: superstitions of all sorts were to her mind unworthy of a reasonable being. And yet at that moment, she was so completely unnerved that she looked round the old Gothic room, with a nameless fear throbbing at her heart.

It was enough—though nothing appeared: it was enough—though superstitions of all sorts were unworthy of a reasonable being—to shake her fell purpose, for the time. Nothing that Jack could say had the least effect on her. Having arrived at a determination, she was mistress of herself again. ‘Not yet,’ she resolved; ‘there may be consequences that I haven’t calculated on. I’ll take the night to think of it.’ Jack tried a last entreaty as she put her hand into her pocket, searching for the cup-

board key, and tried it in vain. ‘No,’ she said; ‘I will keep it for you. Come to me when you are really ill, and want it’

Her pocket proved to be entangled for the moment in the skirt of her dress. In irritably trying to disengage it, she threw out the key on the floor. Jack picked the key up and noticed the inscription on the handle. ‘Pink-Room Cupboard,’ he read. ‘Why do they call it by that name?’

In her over-wrought state of mind, she had even felt the small irritating influence of an entangled pocket. She was in no temper to endure simple questions patiently. ‘Look at the pink curtains, you fool!’ she said—and snatched the key out of his hand.

Jack instantly resented the language and the action. ‘I didn’t come here to

be insulted,' he declared in his loftiest manner.

Madame Fontaine secured the poison in the cupboard without noticing him, and made him more angry than ever.

'Take back your new gloves,' he cried, 'I don't want them!' He rolled up his gloves, and threw them at her. 'I wish I could throw all the cake I've eaten after them!' he burst out fervently.

He delivered this aspiration with an emphatic stamp of his foot. The hysterical excitement in Madame Fontaine forced its way outwards under a new form. She burst into a frantic fit of laughter. 'You curious little creature,' she said; 'I didn't mean to offend you. Don't you know that women will lose their patience sometimes? There!

Shake hands and make it up. And take away the rest of the cake, if you like it.' Jack looked at her in speechless surprise. 'Leave me to myself!' she cried, relapsing into irritability. 'Do you hear? Go! go! go!'

Jack left the room without a word of protest. The rapid changes in her, the bewildering diversity of looks and tones that accompanied them, completely cowed him. It was only when he was safe outside in the corridor, that he sufficiently recovered himself to put his own interpretation on what had happened. He looked back at the door of Madame Fontaine's room, and shook his little grey head solemnly.

'Now I understand it,' he thought to himself; 'Mrs. Housekeeper is mad. Oh,

dear, dear me—Bedlam is the only place for her !’

He descended the first flight of stairs, and stopped again to draw the moral suggested by his own clever discovery. ‘I must speak to Mistress about this,’ he concluded. ‘The sooner we are back in London, the safer I shall feel.’

CHAPTER VI

MRS. WAGNER was still hard at work at her desk, when Jack Straw made his appearance again in the private office.

‘Where have you been all this time?’ she asked. ‘And what have you done with your new gloves?’

‘I threw them at Madame Fontaine,’ Jack answered. ‘Don’t alarm yourself. I didn’t hit her.’

Mrs. Wagner laid down her pen, smiling ‘Even business must give way to such an extraordinary event as this,’ she said.

‘What has gone wrong between you and Madame Fontaine?’

Jack entered into a long rambling narrative of what he had heard on the subject of the wonderful remedy, and of the capricious manner in which a supply of it had been first offered to him, and then taken away again. ‘Turn it over in your own mind,’ he said grandly, ‘and tell me what your opinion is, so far.’

‘I think you had better let Madame Fontaine keep her medicine in the cupboard,’ Mrs. Wagner answered; ‘and when you want anything of that sort, mention it to me.’ The piece of cake which Jack had brought away with him attracted her attention, as she spoke. Had he bought it himself? or had he carried it off from the house-

keeper's room? 'Does that belong to you, or to Madame Fontaine?' she asked. 'Anything that belongs to Madame Fontaine must be taken back to her.'

'Do you think I would condescend to take anything that didn't belong to me?' said Jack indignantly. He entered into another confused narrative, which brought him, in due course of time, to the dropping of the key and the picking of it up. 'I happened to read "Pink-Room-Cupboard" on the handle,' he proceeded; 'and when I asked what it meant she called me a fool, and snatched the key out of my hand. Do you suppose I was going to wear her gloves after that? No! I am as capable of self-sacrifice as any of you—I acted nobly—I threw them at her. Wait a bit! You may

laugh at that, but there's something terrible to come. What do you think of a furious person who insults me, suddenly turning into a funny person who shakes hands with me and bursts out laughing? She did that. On the honour of a gentleman, she did that. Follow my wise example ; keep out of her way—and let's get back to London as soon as we can. Oh, I have got a reason for what I say. Just let me look through the keyhole before I mention it. All right ; there's nobody at the keyhole ; I may say it safely. It's a dreadful secret to reveal—Mrs. Housekeeper is mad ! No, no ; there can be no possible mistake about it. If there's a creature living who thoroughly understands madness when he sees it—by Heaven, I'm that man !'

Watching Jack attentively while he was speaking, Mrs. Wagner beckoned to him to come nearer, and took him by the hand.

‘No more now,’ she said quietly ; ‘you are beginning to get a little excited.’

‘Who says that?’ cried Jack.

‘Your eyes say it. Come here to your place.’

She rose, and led him to his customary seat in the recess of the old-fashioned window. ‘Sit down,’ she said.

‘I don’t want to sit down.’

‘Not if I ask you?’

He instantly sat down. Mrs. Wagner produced her pocket-book, and made a mark in it with her pencil. ‘One good conduct-mark already for Jack,’ she said. ‘Now I must go on with my work ; and you

must occupy yourself quietly, in some way that will amuse you. What will you do ?'

Jack, steadily restraining himself under the firm kind eyes that rested on him, was not in the right frame of mind for discovering a suitable employment. 'You tell me,' he said.

Mrs. Wagner pointed to the bag of keys, hanging over his shoulder. 'Have you cleaned them yet ?' she asked.

His attention was instantly diverted to the keys; he was astonished at having forgotten them. Mrs. Wagner rang the bell, and supplied him with sandpaper, leather, and whiting. 'Now then,' she said, pointing to the clock, 'for another hour at least—silence and work !'

She returned to her desk ; and Jack opened his bag.

He spread out the rusty keys in a row, on the seat at his side. Looking from one to the other before he began the cleansing operations, he started, picked out one key, and held it up to the light. There was something inscribed on the handle, under a layer of rust and dirt. He snatched up his materials, and set to work with such good will that the inscription became visible in a few minutes. He could read it plainly—‘Pink-Room Cupboard.’ A word followed which was not quite so intelligible to him—the word ‘Duplicate.’ But he had no need to trouble himself about this. ‘Pink-Room Cupboard,’ on a second key, told him all he wanted to know.

His eyes sparkled—he opened his lips—looked at Mrs. Wagner, busily engaged with her pen—and restrained himself within the hard limits of silence. ‘Aha! I can take Mrs. Housekeeper’s medicine whenever I like,’ he thought slyly.

His faith in the remedy was not at all shaken by his conviction that Madame Fontaine was mad. It was the Doctor who had made the remedy—and the Doctor could not commit a mistake. ‘She’s not fit to have the keeping of such a precious thing,’ he concluded. ‘I’ll take the whole of it under my own charge. Shall I tell Mistress, when we have done work?’

He considered this question, cleaning his keys, and looking furtively from time to time at Mrs. Wagner. The cunning which

is almost invariably well developed in a feeble intelligence, decided him on keeping his discovery to himself. ‘Anything that belongs to Madame Fontaine must be taken back to her’—was what the Mistress had just said to him. He would certainly be ordered to give up the duplicate key (which meant giving up the wonderful remedy) if he took Mrs. Wagner into his confidence. ‘When I have got what I want,’ he thought, ‘I can throw away the key—and there will be an end of it.’

The minutes followed each other, the quarters struck—and still the two strangely associated companions went on silently with their strangely dissimilar work. It was close on the time for the striking of the hour, when a third person interrupted the proceed-

ings—that person being no other than Madame Fontaine again.

‘A thousand pardons, Mrs. Wagner! At what time can I say two words to you in confidence?’

‘You could not have chosen your time better, Madame Fontaine. My work is done for to-day.’ She paused, and looked at Jack, ostentatiously busy with his keys. The wisest course would be to leave him in the window-seat, harmlessly employed. ‘Shall we step into the dining-room?’ she suggested, leading the way out. ‘Wait there, Jack, till I return; I may have another good mark to put in my pocket-book.’

The two ladies held their conference, with closed doors, in the empty dining-room.

‘My only excuse for troubling you,

madam,' the widow began, 'is that I speak in the interest of that poor little Jack, whom we have just left in the office. May I ask if you have lately observed any signs of excitement in him?'

'Certainly!' Mrs. Wagner answered, with her customary frankness of reply; 'I found it necessary to compose him, when he came to me about an hour ago—and you have just seen that he is as quiet again as a man can be. I am afraid you have had reason to complain of his conduct yourself?'

Madame Fontaine lifted her hands in gently-expressed protest. 'Oh, dear, no—not to complain! To pity our afflicted Jack, and to feel, perhaps, that your irresistible influence over him might be required—no more.'

‘You are very good,’ said Mrs. Wagner drily. ‘At the same time, I beg you to accept my excuses—not only for Jack, but for myself. I found him so well behaved, and so capable of restraining himself in London, that I thought I was running no risk in bringing him with me to Frankfort.’

‘Pray say no more, dear madam—you really confuse me. I am the innocent cause of his little outbreak. I most unfortunately reminded him of the time when he lived with us at Würzburg—and in that way I revived one of his old delusions, which even your admirable treatment has failed to remove from his mind.’

‘May I ask what the delusion is, Madame Fontaine?’

‘One of the commonest delusions among

insane persons, Mrs. Wagner—the delusion that he has been poisoned. Has he ever betrayed it in your presence? ’

‘ I heard something of it,’ Mrs. Wagner answered, ‘ from the superintendent at the madhouse in London.’

‘ Ah, indeed? The superintendent merely repeated, I suppose, what Jack had told him? ’

‘ Exactly. I was careful not to excite him, by referring to it myself, when I took him under my charge. At the same time, it is impossible to look at his hair and his complexion, without seeing that *some* serious accident must have befallen him.’

‘ Most unquestionably! He is the victim, poor creature—not of poison—but of his own foolish curiosity, in my husband’s

surgery, and you see the result. Alas! I cannot give you the scientific reasons for it.'

'I shouldn't understand them, Madame Fontaine, if you could.'

'Ah, dear lady, you kindly say so, because you are unwilling to humiliate me. Is there anything Jack may have said to you about me, which seems to require an explanation—if I can give it?'

She slipped in this question, concealing perfectly the anxiety that suggested it, so far as her voice and her eyes were concerned. But the inner agitation rose to the surface in a momentary trembling of her lips.

Slight as it was, that sign of self-betrayal did not escape Mrs. Wagner's keen observation. She made a cautious reply. 'On the

contrary,' she said, 'from what Jack has told me, the conclusion is plain that you have really done him a service. You have succeeded in curing that delusion you spoke of—and I applaud your good sense in refusing to trust him with the medicine.'

Madame Fontaine made a low curtsy. 'I shall remember those kind words, among the happy events of my life,' she said, with her best grace. 'Permit me to take your hand.' She pressed Mrs. Wagner's hand gratefully—and made an exit which was a triumph of art. Even a French actress might have envied the manner in which she left the room.

But, when she ascended the stairs, with no further necessity for keeping up appearances, her step was as slow and as weary as

the step of an old woman. ‘Oh, my child,’ she thought sadly, with her mind dwelling again on Minna, ‘shall I see the end of all these sacrifices, when your wedding-day comes with the end of the year?’ She sat down by the fire in her room, and for the first time in her life, the harmless existence of one of those domestic drudges whom she despised began to seem enviable to her. There were merits visible now, in the narrow social horizon that is bounded by gossip, knitting, and tea.

Left by herself in the dining-room, Mrs. Wagner took a turn up and down, with her mind bent on penetrating Madame Fontaine’s motives.

There were difficulties in her way. It was easy to arrive at the conclusion that

there was something under the surface ; but the obstacles to advancing beyond this point of discovery seemed to defy removal. To distrust the graceful widow more resolutely than ever, and to lament that she had not got wise David Glenney to consult with, were the principal results of Mrs. Wagner's reflections when she returned to the office.

There was Jack—in the nursery phrase, as good as gold—still in his place on the window seat, devoted to his keys. His first words related entirely to himself.

‘If this isn't good conduct,’ he said, ‘I should like to know what is. Give me my other mark.’

Mrs. Wagner took out her pocket-book and made the new mark.

‘Thank you,’ said Jack. ‘Now I want

something else. I want to know what Mrs. Housekeeper has been saying. I have been seriously alarmed about you?'

'Why, Jack?'

'She hasn't bitten you, has she? Oh, they do it sometimes! What lies has she been telling you of me? Oh, they lie in the most abominable manner! What? She has been talking of me in the kindest terms? Then why did she want to get out of my hearing? Ah, they're so infernally deceitful! I do hate mad people.'

Mrs. Wagner produced her pocket-book again. 'I shall scratch out your mark,' she said sternly, 'if I hear any more talk of that sort.'

Jack gathered his keys together with a strong sense of injury, and put them back

in his leather bag. ‘You’re a little hard on me,’ he said, ‘when I’m only warning you for your own good. I don’t know why it is, you’re not as kind to me here, as you used to be in London. And I feel it, I do!’ He laid himself down on the window seat, and began to cry.

Mrs. Wagner was not the woman to resist this expression of the poor little man’s feeling. In a moment she was at the window comforting him and drying his eyes, as if he had been a child. And, like a child, Jack took advantage of the impression that he had made. ‘Look at your desk,’ he said piteously; ‘there’s another proof how hard you are on me. I used to keep the key of your desk in London. You won’t trust it to me here.’

Mrs. Wagner went to the desk, locked it, and returned to Jack. Few people know how immensely an act of kindness gains in effect, by being performed in silence. Mrs. Wagner was one of the few. Without a word, she opened the leather bag and dropped the key into it. Jack's gratitude rushed innocently to an extreme which it had never reached yet. 'Oh!' he cried, 'would you mind letting me kiss you?'

Mrs. Wagner drew back, and held up a warning hand. Before she could express herself in words, Jack's quick ear caught the sound of footsteps approaching the door. 'Is she coming back?' he cried, still suspicious of Madame Fontaine. Mrs. Wagner instantly opened the door, and found herself face to face with Joseph the footman.

‘Do you know, ma’am, when Mr. Keller will be back?’ he asked.

‘I didn’t even know that he was out, Joseph. Who wants him?’

‘A gentleman, ma’am, who says he comes from Munich.’

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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